Ernest Dowson: The Language of Poetry at the Victorian Fin de Siècle

by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a study of certain aspects, principally linguistic, of the work of Ernest Christopher Dowson (1867–1900) which have received little or no attention in the critical literature so far published in English (though a major general study of Dowson has recently been published in French). These aspects include an examination of the degree to which the work of Walter Pater and John Henry Newman, claimed by Dowson himself as major influences upon him, had an impact upon his attitudes and literary style; the relationship of his poetry to the voice and to the body (these seen both in reality and as literary constructs); Dowson's informal written style as displayed in his correspondence; and the formal, literary English of his poetry and prose translations from French. In order to establish a context for this research, the study begins with a biographical reassessment. It concludes with an examination of the influence of Dowson's writing on twentieth-century literature and culture. It emerges that, though he has not generally been considered a major poet, Dowson's diversity and richness in his use of language plays a significant role in bridging the gap between the literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Before I began I had no inward feel of being able to finish.

John Keats (on reception of the 1817 Poems).

My thanks are firstly due to my father without whom my research would not have been possible. I am indebted to him for (almost) managing to suspend his dismay when I failed, for a long time, to produce any tangible results of my labours.

I am grateful to Rowena Fowler who not only provided me with expert supervision, but also gave me her friendship. I would also like to thank Helen Small whose encouragement and expertise were invaluable.

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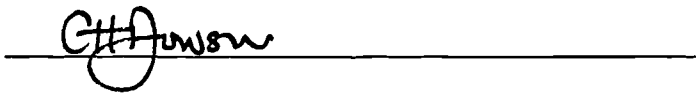
My final acknowledgement must be to Ernest Christopher Dowson.

*& he owns all of books!

This dissertation presents research carried out at the University of Bristol from October 1993 to December 1997. All work is my own except where otherwise acknowledged. The views expressed in this dissertation are my own and do not represent those of the University of Bristol.

Signed 

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A Note on Jean-Jacques Chardin's *Ernest Dowson (1867-1900) et la Crise Fin de Siècle Anglaise.*

As yet, there is still no definitive study of Ernest Dowson in the English language. However, Jean-Jacques Chardin's *Ernest Dowson (1867–1900) et la Crise Fin de Siècle Anglaise* was published at an advanced stage in the preparation of my thesis. He has necessarily touched upon many of the same issues as I have in the study of Dowson's poetry and prose. Chardin is scrupulous in documenting alternative manuscript sources and his book contains many useful readings. However, he approaches Dowson's work from a French critical background, while I have concentrated on recent Anglo-American developments in Victorian poetry. I have indicated the fundamental divergences between Chardin's work and my own, but on the whole, the two studies are complementary.

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Chapter 1

Why are these strange souls born everywhere today?[1]

Ernest Christopher Dowson was born on 2 August 1867 at "The Grove", Belmont Hill, Lee, in Kent. His mother Annie was barely twenty at the time; a young woman of Scottish descent whose maiden name was Swan. His father, Alfred, was the nephew of Alfred Dommett, the "Waring" of Browning's poem and later Prime Minister of New Zealand. At the time of Ernest's birth his parents were reasonably prosperous and in good health, but within a short time his father's health began to deteriorate. His mother had always been of a delicate constitution, and the young Ernest accompanied his parents abroad in their quest for sunnier climes. Alfred Dowson had strong literary interests, and he was friendly with Robert Browning. In 1873, on the French Riviera, the Dowsons met Andrew Lang and Sidney Colvin briefly and spent some time with Robert Louis Stevenson,[2] with whom Alfred Dowson had much in common.

Ernest was described by his uncle as "a good looking, rather shy boy of 14, studious, thoughtful and of a serious disposition".[3] But even by the time his brother Rowland Corbett was born, eight years after Ernest, both the health and the income of the family were deteriorating. Bridge Dock,[4] the dry dock owned by the family at

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[1] W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies: Memories and Reflections* (1955; London: Bracken Books, 1995) 315. Henceforth *Autobiographies*.

[2] Desmond Flower and Henry Maas quote from *The Stevenson Library of Edwin J. Beinecke* that "I have made myself indispensible to the Dowsons' little boy ... I have been fooling about with him all afternoon, playing dominoes ... and carrying him on my back a little."

[3] Lewis Swan, in a letter to his daughter Madeleine, quoted in Mark Longaker, *Ernest Dowson* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1945) 17. Henceforth Longaker.

[4] A picture of Blackpool Dock, undoubtedly based on Bridge Dock, is given in the opening pages of Dowson and Moore's collaborative novel, *A Comedy of Masks* (1893: London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1977) 1-2:

> Many years ago, in the days ... of wooden ships, it had no doubt been a flourishing ship-yard ... But as time went on ... and the advance on the Clyde and the Tyne had made Thames ship-building a thing of the past, Blackpool Dock had ceased to be of commercial importance. A dignified, scarcely prosperous quiet seemed the normal air of Blackpool Dock, so that even when it was busiest, and work still came in, almost by tradition, with a

Limehouse, was frequently leased out, but from time to time Alfred Dowson was obliged to supervise affairs there. In the mid eighteen-seventies there were few ships in need of repair at Bridge Dock. Despite the family's financial difficulties, the trips abroad continued during Ernest's childhood, which he was later to describe to Victor Plarr as "pagan", and it was from these that he developed his taste for French life and literature. He received some tuition from an Italian priest for a short time, and whilst his schooling was erratic it was sufficient to admit him to Queen's College, Oxford, in the Michaelmas term 1886. His father had entered him for the Jodrell Scholarship, but Dowson was unsuccessful and his father was obliged to fund his studies.

One of his first acquaintances at Queen's was Arthur Moore, son of the portrait painter John C. Moore and nephew of the Royal Academician Henry Moore. Moore was later to become Dowson's collaborator on several novels. Dowson began his literary career shortly after his arrival at Oxford, for in November 1886 his first poem was published in *The London Society*. When it was collected by Desmond Flower in 1934, "Sonnet of a Little Girl" became number four in Dowson's sonnet sequence. It was also at Queen's that he met Sam Smith and W. R. Thomas -- known familiarly as "The Rabbit" or "Le Lapin" -- and that he established his relationship with Lionel Johnson. Thomas's 1928 essay, "Ernest Dowson at Oxford",[5] provides the most reliable evidence concerning Dowson's university career. Baudelaire is reported to have been Dowson's favourite poet at Oxford and Zola -- despite being under ban -- his favourite novelist. In addition, the ideas of Schopenhauer and Walter Pater permeated the minds of undergraduates in the eighteen-eighties.

Dowson's taste for travel undimmed, in the summer of 1887 he travelled abroad with Arthur Moore, the destination unclear, before removing to lodgings at 5 Grove

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certain steadiness ... there was still a suggestion of mildewed antiquity about it all that was, at least to the nostrils of the outsider, not unpleasing. For despite its sordid surroundings and its occasional lapses into bustle, Blackpool Dock ... was deeply permeated by the spirit of the picturesque.

Street for his second year at Queen's. There, according to Thomas, he became increasingly depressed. In Grove Street Dowson tried whisky and, on two occasions, some bhang pills supplied by an Indian student. Whisky, he felt, only intensified his depression: "Whiskey is unsatisfying to me -- phiz is the most god-forsaken beverage that was ever created".[6] The second trial of bhang resulted in a visit to a chemist for an antidote. According to Thomas, "his habits were simply those of many undergraduates at that time".[7]

In March 1888 Dowson sat Honours Moderation examinations and then refused to sit any more examinations. The reasons for this are unclear. Perhaps he felt that he had done badly in his examinations, or perhaps there was pressure from his parents for him to assist in the running of Bridge Dock. Mark Longaker's biography of 1945 states categorically that, "His decision to reject the privilege of reading for honours was the result of an ever-growing belief that for him there were few advantages in taking a degree".[8] In support of this he asserts that Alfred Dowson still retained some hope of his son finally receiving his degree but Longaker does concede that the younger Dowson had run up bills "of considerable size".[9] Whatever the cause, Dowson went down from Oxford without graduating and with a view to taking up a position at the Limehouse dock. Never dispirited, according to Thomas, he also moved back to his parental home in Woodford whilst his father began proceedings to recover Bridge Dock. Dowson had his own office at Limehouse, and he frequently cites Bridge Dock as his address for correspondence. Although he still saw his Oxford friends, he now had a new circle of medical students with whom he socialised in the West End most evenings. In Charles Sayle's rooms at Gray's Inn

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[5] W. R. Thomas, "Ernest Dowson at Oxford," *The Nineteenth Century and After* 103 Apr. 1928: 565.
[6] Desmond Flower and Henry Maas, *The Letters of Ernest Dowson* (London: Cassell and Co., 1967) 108. Henceforth *Letters*.
[7] W. R. Thomas, "Ernest Dowson at Oxford," *The Nineteenth Century and After* 103 Apr. 1928: 565.
[8] Longaker 46.
[9] Longaker 46.

Dowson met Victor Plarr who was later to write *Ernest Dowson, 1888-1897: Reminiscences, Unpublished Letters, and Marginalia.* Additionally, he met Plarr's room-mate, Frank M. Walton, and all three were shortly engaged upon a satirical literary exercise, the annotation of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm.* Dowson, under the pseudonym of Anatole de Montmartre, took the game more seriously than Plarr and Walton, and from his notes it is possible to deduce that he had already formed the idea that spiritual help often proved worthless in the face of material need. In one of his notes he wrote, "Symbolic of the inefficacy of all spiritual, supernatural help in one's sorest need".[10]

During the summer of 1889 Longaker reports that Dowson took a short cruise with one of his father's patrons, which perhaps gave some benefit to his already-failing health. Part of the summer was also spent in Scotland. His social circle widened, and he was frequently at The Crown in Charing Cross before midnight, in the company of those such as Arthur Symons, Herbert Horne, Charles Conder, Conal O'Riordan, Lionel Johnson, Max Beerbohm, and occasionally Aubrey Beardsley. Then, in November 1889 he met the child who was to become to Ernest Dowson, "you, who are my verses", Adelaide Foltinowicz. Adelaide was the daughter of a Polish restaurateur and was only twelve at the time of her meeting with Dowson. Her father's restaurant was at 19 Sherwood Street, Soho, and it was here that Dowson often went to dine and to talk or play cards with Adelaide. This continued over a course of several years and was a source of intense pleasure as well as pain to Dowson.

In April 1889 the *Temple Bar* published "April" -- later to become "My Lady April". In the same month, Dowson and Moore finished their first novel, *The Passion of Dr. Ludovicus,* but it never found a publisher. They had written alternate

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[10] Quoted in Longaker 58.

chapters, and by the end of the year the work had been rejected by three publishers. "Blast the whole race of publishers",[11] wrote the twenty-two-year-old Dowson. Around the same time, Victor Plarr passed on to Dowson his unpaid post as sub-editor of *The Critic*, which also carried with it the post of dramatic critic. The periodical was ultimately unsuccessful and after the fifth issue on 8 March 1890 was seen no more. It did, however, provide Dowson with a legitimate excuse for being, most nights, in the West End where he could indulge his passion for the company of little girls: "the Woman of Society is unmentionable -- the Grisette is a fraud ... Nay, -- as I have remarked before -- the idea of the little girl is the only one which does not make for bloodiness".[12]

Dowson was never a member of the Odd Volumes Club, but his correspondence shows that he attended some of their dinners. Early in 1890 a series of informal meetings began at which young poets read and discussed their verse. The first meetings were held at 20 Fitzroy Street, but in 1891, the group became more organised and moved to an upstairs room at the Old Cheshire Cheese tavern in Wine Office Court off Fleet Street. Members of the club included Arthur Symons, G. A. Greene, John Gray, and John Davidson, and they were occasionally visited by Wilde and Yeats. For a time, they wavered between referring to themselves as the "Rhymers" or "Rhymsters" Club -- eventually settling on the former. Dowson embarked upon a growing friendship with these poets and this greatly enlarged his literary circle of friends. They read their work aloud and then discussed what they had heard, sometimes in the most critical terms.[13] Each Rhymer was supplied with a churchwarden pipe with a long, slender mouthpiece and, as Edgar Jepson recalls:

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[11] *Letters* 99.

[12] *Letters* 108.

[13] W. B. Yeats recalled that "The meetings were always decorous and often dull; some one would read out a poem and we would comment, too politely for the criticism to have great value; and yet that we read out our poems, and thought that they could be so tested, was a definition of our aims" *Autobiographies* 300-1.

> I do not know that wine was forbidden, but to each poet was his pot of beer and churchwarden pipe, and perhaps to drink wine would have been an ostentation.[14]

Commentators on the Rhymers' Club like to stress the importance of the attempt to revive the literary tavern or to emulate the literary coteries of Paris but, in truth, the Rhymers did neither.

Most of his acquaintances remember that Dowson, still only twenty-three and probably shy, was not particularly fond of reading aloud and often prevailed upon Johnson or Greene to stand in for him. However, Frank Harris's probably much-exaggerated account of his relationship with Dowson includes the following recollection:

> "Here's something to a madman in Bedlam," and he began reciting again ... It was splendid; it sang itself and satisfied the critical faculty in me; yet there was better to come, I divined ... "Here is one of my best," he said, and began with a voice that trembled in spite of himself:[15]

There then follows a transcription of the "Cynara" poem and a rather emotional account of Harris's subsequent conversation with Dowson. Harris would have us believe that he roused the poet to such a reading by speaking "of him as a dreamer, a failure".[16] Longaker justifies Dowson's recital to Harris on the grounds that "Harris was not a group", and that "Dowson's reticence had been mitigated by the reassuring effects of brandy".[17] Michael Holland also remembers Dowson reading "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" in the autumn of 1896 at Pont-Aven before an audience which included the novelist Gertrude Atherton and Horace Vachell.

Afterwards, plans were drawn up for a publication of verse emanating from The Rhymers' Club, ultimately issued by John Lane in 1892. Each member was to have

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[14] Edgar Jepson, *Memories of a Victorian* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933) 235. Henceforth *Memories*.
[15] Frank Harris, *Contemporary Portraits* (New York: Frank Harris, 1919) 73. Henceforth Harris.
[16] Harris 72.

up to six poems in the volume, and it evidently proved a troublesome task for Dowson to "select some versicles".[18] In a letter to Greene he picked eight possibles and was finally represented by "The Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration", "Amor Umbratilis", "O Mors!", "Ad Domnulam Suam", "Vanitas", and "Villanelle of Sunset". Yeats recalled later:

> For long I only knew Dowson's *O Mors*, to quote but the first words of its long title, and his *Villanelle of Sunset* from his reading, and it was because of the desire to hold them in my hand that I suggested the first Book of The Rhymers Club.[19]

Horne had in part pre-empted the volume by publishing in October 1891 the first two poems on the list along with "Fleur de la lune".[20] W. B. Yeats and Lionel Johnson organised the project, whilst the editorial board numbered a further five members including Dowson. This volume gave a more substantial objective to the members of the Club, but it was not Dowson's only literary outlet during the early eighteen-nineties. Herbert Horne, an occasional visitor to The Cheshire Cheese, offered to print anything Dowson could submit, albeit with no pecuniary reward. Thus his periodical *The Century's Guild Hobby Horse* was the fortunate recipient of the poem "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae", or the "Cynara poem" as it has come to be known. February 1891 saw the publication of "The Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration" in *The Hobby Horse* and in April the prose piece "A Case of Conscience" appeared. Selwyn Image was the co-editor of *The Hobby Horse* and was a frequent visitor to Horne's house in Fitzroy Street. Other regulars included Frank Brangwyn, William Rothenstein, Ernest Rhys, Walter Crane, Yeats, Wilde, and Johnson. In the period 1890-1, *Macmillan's Magazine* also printed two short stories by Dowson, "The Diary of a Successful Man" and "The Story of a Violin".

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[17] Longaker 107.
[18] *Letters* 287.
[19] W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* 301.

The Albemarle, Hubert Crackanthorpe's periodical, printed the poem to which Frank Harris refers, "To One In Bedlam". Then, near the end of 1892, William Theodore Peters commissioned a short play from Dowson, "The Pierrot of the Minute", which he had only three weeks to write. It was performed on 22 November 1892 at Chelsea Town Hall, but the general consensus then, as now, was that it is not one of Dowson's finest pieces. One contemporary review called it a "pale reflection"[21] of Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci". Indeed, it is reported that Dowson himself never cared much for the piece. Sometime also in 1892 Dowson suggested to Victor Plarr that they might produce a joint volume of verse. It seems that Plarr liked the idea since there is evidence in the letters of a provisional title, "better I like 'Vineleaf and Vine' -- & best perhaps 'Rose and Pine'",[22] but the project came to nothing.

In August 1891 his parents moved to Maida Hill, which in some ways suited Dowson, since he was now in close proximity to his collaborator Arthur Moore. He continued to work at Bridge Dock during the day and to go to the West End in the evenings, usually arriving there by 6pm. When he was not at The Cheshire Cheese, Dowson could be found at The Cock on Shaftesbury Avenue. He was by then already in the habit of dining at "Poland", as he called the Foltinowicz restaurant, usually in the company of Moore, Edgar Jepson, or the actor Marmaduke Langdale. He very much feared being misunderstood in his relationship with Adelaide, and indeed his fears were not unfounded since, as Jepson observed, he was the victim of a "posthumous misfortune which may cast a perpetual slur on his name".[23] It is thought that in or around September 1891 the relationship foundered or at least Dowson believed it to have done. He had become increasingly worried after reports of the abduction of a young girl of Adelaide's age, and he feared shocking her by

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[20] In *Verses* this poem appears under the title "Flos Lunae".
[21] "Drama," *Athenaeum* 8 May 1897: 626.
[22] *Letters* 187.
[23] Edgar Jepson, "The Real Ernest Dowson," *Academy* 73 2 Nov. 1907: 94. Henceforth Jepson.

declaring his wish to marry her. Dowson again fell into bouts of depression, and it was perhaps this that prompted him to follow Lionel Johnson and Charles Sayle into the Catholic Church. Plarr records, "'I have been admitted,' he said, but he seemed disappointed, for the heavens had not fallen, nor had a sign been vouchsafed".[24] Yet a letter to Sayle indicates that he regularly attended mass, for he refers to the Dominican church in Haverstock Hill as his "usual Church".[25]

It was not just events at "Poland", however, which were causing Dowson anxiety at the beginning of 1893. Bridge Dock was in severe financial difficulty since there were few ships were in need of repair. It seems that at this time Dowson resolved to marry Adelaide and applied for a post as a librarian at Newington, South East London, asking Plarr and Sayle to act as referees. He was unsuccessful in his application. It was also about this time that the rumours concerning the shabbiness of his appearance seem to have originated. Although Dowson was always reasonably well-dressed, the evidence shows that he did indeed sleep wherever he happened to find himself with "the cat's happy aptitude for sleeping where night found him".[26]

In 1892 *The Book of The Rhymers' Club* was published and the following year much of Dowson's poetry appeared in periodicals. "The Dead Child" came out in the *Atalanta,* and "A Roundel" and "Villanelle of His Lady's Treasures" were published in the *Temple Bar.* In 1893 he undertook to translate Zola's *La Terre,* which was later published under the editorship of Teixiera de Mattos for the collection of the Lutetian Society along with translations by Symons and Plarr.

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[24] Victor Gustave Plarr, *Ernest Dowson 1888-97: Reminiscences, Unpublished Letters and Marginalia* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1914) 30.

[25] The manuscript of this letter is in the Bodleian Library, and a transcription appears in Longaker 70 with the sentence "come to mass with me first by all means; then I can show you the road." It is mistranscribed in *Letters* 235 as "show you the loved." The first transcription would appear to be correct, although the writing is difficult to decipher, since the content of the letter expresses hope that Sayle will find his way to either the Dowson residence or to the "usual Church".

[26] Edgar Jepson, "The Real Ernest Dowson," 95.

Alexander Louis Teixeira de Mattos shared lodgings with the actor Charles Goodhart, and, although he was frequently to be found in Dowson's company, always disliked him.[27] 1894 saw Dowson begin a translation of Couperus's *Majesty*, passed on to him by Teixeira de Mattos who found himself too busy, although Longaker also suggests that de Mattos could find no-one else willing to undertake the work for the pittance which was offered. Although Dowson found *La Terre* tedious -- Longaker reports that he retreated to Hillier's cottage outside London in order to complete it -- he was establishing a reputation for himself as a competent translator. During this year he was again concerned with affairs at "Poland". In March, Adelaide's father became gravely ill, and it was Dowson who was asked to bring in a solicitor to draw up the will. He also chose this period to declare himself to Adelaide's family. He told Adelaide and her mother that he was willing to wait until she was of "proper" marriageable age, and evidently they agreed, not unwillingly, to a postponement of his formal proposal of marriage. At the time of her father's death Adelaide was only fifteen. Dowson had declared himself and achieved nothing, for nothing ever became official between the two.

Dowson's own father was exhibiting signs of tuberculosis, so the family moved to Chadwell Heath on the edge of Epping Forest. It was in 1893 that his own first tubercular attack was recorded. Within the year the family moved to a flat at 7 Albert Mansions, near Battersea Park. Economy was necessary because of the financial straits at Bridge Dock. Horne's *Hobby Horse* published "The Statute of Limitations" in 1893 and, most importantly, the second of the Dowson / Moore novels, *A Comedy of Masks*, found a publisher in Heinemann. Dowson "tremble[d] at the prospect of being reviewed",[28] but the critics were not as unkind as they might have been. *The Athenaeum* called it "subtle and interesting rather than

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[27] Longaker records Teixeira de Mattos's reluctance to be seen with Dowson because "he wanted to be considered fastidious in his garb" 131.

convincing".[29] In 1893 too Paul Verlaine visited London at the suggestion of Will Rothenstein. His first lecture was at Barnard's Inn almost exactly a year after the first staging of "The Pierrot of the Minute". Things appeared to be picking up. Then, in August 1894, Alfred Dowson died suddenly. His death certificate specifies only natural causes, but Plarr believed it to have been suicide. Whichever it was, within six months Annie Dowson was to follow suit. Dowson conspicuously makes no reference to either event in his letters. Certain reports have it that his mother hanged herself and that it was Ernest who found her. When Rowland Corbett went to live with relatives, Ernest moved into rooms at Bridge Dock. Despite the traumatic events in his personal life, and the "indecision, ill-health and life-sickness"[30] which Longaker writes of, 1894 still saw some literary output from Ernest Dowson. Several pieces appeared in *The Yellow Book*, and *The Second Book of the Rhymers Club* was issued. *La Terre* was published, and Dowson completed *Majesty*. Furthermore, he began a new translation of Richard Muther's *A History of Modern Painting* from the original German, with G. A. Greene and A. C. Hillier. The first two volumes were printed in 1895, the third the following year. His social activities had not diminished and he was still regularly attending plays and socialising with actors such as Goodhart and Lennox Pawle, often at "Poland", which Adelaide's mother was now running.

In the summer of 1895, he cleared out his office at Bridge Dock with the help of a friend, Edgar Jepson, and lodged in Bloomsbury. Jepson was to prove a staunch defender of Dowson despite the ill-will which existed between the two over the publication of *Verses*. Jepson offered to act as a go-between for Dowson and Elkin Mathews, though Dowson had all but decided to submit the poems to the publisher Leonard Smithers. Dowson was much irritated by the good intentions of his friend

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[28] *Letters* 292.

and told Moore, "I wish ... if you see Jepson, you would tactfully convey to him that I am not particularly gratified by his constituting himself a sort of emmissary" [*sic*].[31] However, Dowson's better nature would always out and he added, "By word of mouth this sort of hint can be conveyed more pleasantly than by writing".[32]

The Yellow Book was in decline. John Lane had published it largely as a medium for Aubrey Beardsley's designs, but during the trials of Oscar Wilde he dismissed Beardsley for fear of bad publicity and reprisals. Elkin Mathews then published Dowson's first and only volume of prose pieces, *Dilemmas: Stories and Studies in Sentiment.* But Elkin Mathews and John Lane were not the only publishers active in the nineties. Smithers was originally a Sheffield solicitor who came to London in 1891. By 1895 he had his own bookshop in Arundel Street off the Strand. Indeed, he was the only publisher who would handle Wilde's work after 1895, but he was declared bankrupt in 1899. In 1895 Arthur Symons met Leonard Smithers and persuaded the latter to start a periodical which could replace *The Yellow Book.* "It is really very excellent ... For type & excellence of reproduction it licks the "Yellow Book" hollow",[33] enthused Dowson. So was born *The Savoy.*

The Savoy was a useful opening not only for Dowson but also for Beardsley, Conder, Rothenstein, Beerbohm, and Yeats. Dowson undertook to contribute to this new magazine on a regular basis, and also to translate Balzac's *La Fille aux yeux d'or,* which was to be issued complete with wood engravings by Charles Conder. Voltaire's *La Pucelle d'Orléans* was next, since Smithers had agreed to keep Dowson supplied with work. Dowson was thus inaugurated as "one of the Smithers people". The enforced postponement of his relationship with Adelaide meant that in 1895 Dowson also travelled to Dieppe, where many of the contributors to *The Savoy*

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[29] "New Novels," *Athenaeum* 23 Dec. 1893: 878.
[30] Longaker 166.
[31] *Letters* 331.
[32] *Letters* 331.

had gone. During this summer in France he saw much of Conder, Greene, and Moore, and the novel *Adrian Rome* was finally finished. Dieppe too was the beginning of his close friendship with Conal O'Riordan, an invalid five years his junior. In September 1895 they went together to Belgium. "We found Bruges crammed with English and came here",[34] wrote Dowson from Ypres, and so they ended up in Paris by October. Dowson took rooms in the Latin Quarter at 214 Rue St. Jacques, at the Hôtel de Medici, and he stayed there until the end of the year.

Dowson had many friends in Paris, including Henry Davray, a critic for the *Mercure de France*, and Toulouse-Lautrec. Indeed, Pierre Loüys and André Gide were very familiar with Dowson's work. Robert Sherard was also there, as was Aubrey Beardsley, who, like Teixeira de Mattos, did not care for Dowson's unkempt appearance:

> When any of Dowson's writings were pressed on Beardsley, the image of the dissipated derelict came between him and the text. "But Dowson is a great poet," Smithers would protest. "I don't care. No man is great enough to excuse behaviour like that."[35]

Dowson was as usual, extremely short of "oof", as he called it, since the red tape surrounding Bridge Dock delayed his receipt of any money. He was also smoking heavily: cigarettes, and strong Vevey cigars. Perhaps as a result of this, in January 1896 he fell very ill, which unfortunately coincided with a visit from Smithers and the organisation of *Verses*. "For the last ten days I have been more or less

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[33] *Letters* 336.

[34] *Letters* 315. There is a short account of Dowson's trip to Belgium in Hesketh Pearson and Hugh Kingsmill, *Talking of Dick Whittington* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1947) 80:

> "We loved the carillon at Bruges," said O'Riordan, "and expected something as beautiful at Ypres, which, as you know, is another of those wonderful old Flemish towns. We were both agog for the first note of the chimes, and stood at our window looking down on the town square. Presently the steady tramp of a regiment was heard, and as they entered the square the bells feebly tinkled out a soldiers' march, like a worn out musical box. I'm afraid that is the memory which has lasted longest with me, but I was very fond of Ernest, and he was just the gentle creature described by everyone who knew him."

decrepit",[36] he wrote to O'Riordan. However, he had sufficiently recovered by 11 February to see the first public production of Wilde's *Salomé*. The next day he left for Pont-Aven, Finistère, in order to conserve some money. Renoir had visited Pont-Aven in 1892, and Gauguin in 1886, and indeed it was quite a cultural paradise since they had left paintings as payment in many hostels. Dowson stayed in the Hôtel Gloanec for six months in the belief that he would be productive there. It was here that Gertrude Atherton and her friend Horace Vachell found Dowson and afterwards they propagated sensational stories regarding his way of life. What is true is that Dowson had been negligent in the care of his teeth. Here also it was that "Monsieur Dowson" declared his love for the baker's wife and was involved in pugilism with the baker. However, as Flower and Maas observe, "it is probable that the accounts which these more respectable acquaintances left at this time were greatly exaggerated".[37]

Verses was published in June 1895 to a fairly good reception. Dowson continued to work on *La Pucelle* and to contribute poems and stories to *The Savoy*. Moore and Smithers came to see him, and he made the acquaintance of Michael Holland, with whom he travelled to Rennes and entertained a party of French cavalry officers. Probably his best story, "The Dying of Francis Donne", was written at Pont-Aven. This story, to which Dowson referred as a "study" rather than a story, functions as a very personal insight into his own mental state. He was highly aware of his own mortality during the last five years of his life, even at the idyllic Pont-Aven. Nevertheless, many of his acquaintances report that Dowson was at his happiest and most productive there:

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[35] Stanley Weintraub, *Aubrey Beardsley: Imp of the Perverse* (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976) 216-7.
[36] *Letters* 340.
[37] *Letters* 313.

> I think he was happiest in the remote Breton villages, whither he now and again withdrew himself, from which he wrote his most delightful letters. They used to give me the impression that the world went well with him there.[38]

It was not only the landscape which had a profound effect upon him. His art also displays a great affection for the inhabitants of Pont-Aven. Indeed, 1896 was Dowson's most prolific year in terms of publication. During the course of the year *The Savoy* published much of the work that he had produced in his "Breton manner": "Impenitentia Ultima", "The Eyes of Pride", "Countess Marie of the Angels", "Saint-Germain-en-Laye", "Breton Afternoon", "Venite Descendamus", "All That A Man May Pray", "The Three Witches", and "Epilogue".

All was not well in London. W. H. Smith the bookseller had refused to stock *The Savoy*, ostensibly on account of a reproduction of a watercolour by Blake, but more probably owing to the nature of Beardsley's contributions. W. B. Yeats favoured the latter suggestion, since the inclusion of Beardsley's grotesques meant that questions were raised concerning the morality of the periodical. In August 1895 the most influential article about Dowson's life appeared in *The Savoy*. The author was Arthur Symons and, although it did not specify Dowson by name, "A Literary Causerie" was to become Dowson's premature obituary and, with a little embroidery, the introduction to *The Poems of Ernest Dowson* issued by The Bodley Head in 1905. What is peculiar is that Dowson actually saw the piece and objected only to minor issues in it, such as the description of his appearance as "dilapidated". Commentators have seized upon this reticence as apparent endorsement of the piece. After six months in Brittany, Dowson returned to London and early in 1897 and, some would say ill-advisedly, took a room above "Poland".

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[38] Edgar Jepson, "The Real Ernest Dowson," 95.

By now Adelaide was unofficially engaged to a tailor who lived above her father's restaurant, Auguste Noelte. Occasional work as a waiter provided Noelte with a more secure income and ultimately a wife. Dowson was still in contact with Charles Sayle and Lionel Johnson, and with Arthur Moore and Conal O'Riordan, but he largely avoided his other friends. At this point engaged with the translation of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, he nonetheless travelled to Arques-la-Bataille, near Dieppe, with Charles Conder in April 1897. They had been there six weeks when they were joined by Oscar Wilde, who stayed nearby at Berneval-sur-Mer. Between Dowson and Wilde sprang up a deeper friendship than had existed before the Wilde trials. Both men were lonely, and indeed Conder and Dowson were two of the few people still to associate with Wilde in 1897. In August Dowson returned to England on the strength of a loan from Wilde. There was to begin a series of correspondence between the Englishman and the Irishman in which the latter requested repayment, since Dowson's debt left him in financial difficulty. "Ernest Dowson writes me that he is trying to borrow £100 from an uncle, as his debt to you is weighing on his mind. He is also becoming practically teetotal",[39] wrote Smithers to Wilde. The money was finally repaid in October. In the interval Dowson had gone to stay with friends in Ireland, J. de Courcy MacDonnell and his family at their home Fairy Hill, Parteen, County Limerick. By mid-October, however, he was back in Paris, where he was doing a considerable amount of translation. He was translating *The Memoirs of Cardinal Dubois* by Paul Lacroix as well as *The Confidantes of a King* by the Goncourt brothers.

In 1897 *The Pageant* included "In a Breton Cemetery", and *The Pierrot of the Minute* was finally published by the House of Smithers with illustrations by Beardsley. Beardsley was in the habit of referring, not particularly aptly, to the play

[39] Letter from Smithers to Wilde, 27 Sept. 1897. Manuscript in the Bodleian Library.

as "a filthy little piece",[40] but was probably persuaded to illustrate it since his sister had once played the Moon Maiden. In September 1897 Adelaide Foltinowicz was married to Auguste Noelte. Early in 1898 Dowson returned to London to again attend to affairs at Bridge Dock. Only a small sum was due to him at this point and the dock was not finally wound up until two years after his death. Despite Beardsley's pleas to Smithers to "hurry Dowson up over the translation",[41] the English version of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* was only ready for publication in March 1898. During this time Smithers tried to help him out of his financial straits, and Dowson's account with Smithers survives in Desmond Flower's collection. About this time he also made the acquaintance of M. P. Shiel, who had tentatively begun a writing career and who stayed with Dowson at Guilford Place for a short time. Flower and Maas report that Rainer Maria Rilke came over from Austria expressly to meet Dowson, having heard high reports of him from friends. There was a short return to Limerick in the summer of 1898 but, other than this, Dowson stayed in London, where he edited Ben Jonson's *Volpone* for Smithers' new edition with its frontispiece by Beardsley. Dowson is reported to have been fond of Jacobean drama at Oxford.

The Hôtel d'Odessa near the Gare Montparnasse was Dowson's home for part of 1899. Robert Sherard was also in Paris and had been much impressed by Dowson's loyalty to Wilde, so when he found him short of money and evidently in poor health he took him to his rooms on the Boulevard Magenta. There Dowson stayed for about a week. Greatly lacking in "oof", he nevertheless managed a trip to St. Germain and to La Roche Guyon in March with Charles Conder. In the late summer of 1899 Dowson took lodgings at 152 Euston Road, but, as yet, no money was forthcoming from his mother's estate. *La Pucelle d'Orléans* was finally published in

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[40] Longaker 187.

this year, as were *The Memoirs of Cardinal Dubois*, but he was still painfully short of money. Smithers too was by this time bankrupt. The high points of the year were the publications of *Adrian Rome* and of his second volume of verse, *Decorations*. It was generally judged to be not as good as *Verses* but containing "enough charming and delicate work to prove that Mr Dowson was a genuine poet".[42] At this time Oscar Wilde wrote of a "Mrs Dowson" in a letter to Smithers. This suggests that Dowson had a companion, if only for a short time, for he never married.

One Friday late in December 1899, Robert Harborough Sherard found Dowson desperately ill in a pub on Bedford Street. Having pacified the landlord, Sherard installed Dowson in bed and promised to return the following Sunday. This he did, by which time Dowson could barely stand. The two then went by cab to Charing Cross Station, where they took a train to Catford and another cab to Sherard's cottage at 26 Sandhurst Gardens, Dowson's last residence. Throughout his stay at the Sherards' Dowson refused to see a doctor, and both Sherard and his wife report his fairly high spirits and eager plans for the future, "when my ship comes in".[43] Dowson was apparently making plans to move to the house of another friend during this time, according to Longaker. "Dowson had often mentioned a friend who had rooms in Bromley".[44] The friend appears to have been Conal O'Riordan. On the evening of 22 February 1900, Dowson prevailed upon Sherard to sit up late into the night with him discussing Dickens and polishing off the remainder of a bottle of port. Sherard recalls that "He wished to be convivial".[45] Early the following morning, Dowson despatched Sherard to buy some ipecacuanha wine to relieve his serious coughing, but, when this had no effect, Sherard ignored Dowson's wishes and

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[41] Stanley Weintraub, *Aubrey Beardsley: Imp of the Perverse* (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976) 215.
[42] "Recent Verse," *Athenaeum* 21 Apr. 1900: 490.
[43] Taken from an account given by Mrs Dillon-Jones, formerly Mrs Sherard, to Mark Longaker quoted Longaker 267.
[44] Longaker 263.

despatched a neighbour for the doctor. A very lucid account from Mrs. Dillon-Jones, Sherard's first wife, states that it was she who was in attendance at Dowson's death, "the causes of death being tuberculosis, years of wayward excess and general self-neglect".[46] He did not, as is reported in "The Tragic Muse", die "in the arms of a woman".[47] As with most of the significant events in the life of Ernest Dowson, the details have been muddied and misrepresented.

[45] Narrative of Robert Harborough Sherard, quoted in *Letters* 420.
[46] William Kean Seymour, "Ernest Dowson's Letters," *Contemporary Review* Mar. 1968: 164.
[47] Ernest Christopher Dowson, "The Tragic Muse," *Contemporary Review* Feb. 1969: 102.

Chapter 2:

Ernest Dowson: "a demoralised Keats?" [48]

In March 1938 John Gawsworth gave a lecture entitled "The Dowson Legend", in which he asserted that, "it has been Ernest Dowson's ill-fortune to have his memory perpetuated in the writings of his slightest acquaintances ... [rather] than in those of his intimate friends".[49] It is generally agreed that the origin of "The Dowson Legend" lies with Symons. Mystery surrounds how so slight an acquaintance as Symons came to be in possession of so many manuscripts and letters belonging to Dowson after his death. However they came into Symons's possession, he was able to sell to Sir Newman Flower a sizeable proportion of papers, including the manuscript of *Madame de Viole*.[50] It seems that they may have been safer out of the hands of Symons, for Gawsworth objects to "A Literary Causerie" on three counts: its description of Dowson's appearance, its sense of his "real personality", and its conviction of his urge to escape from life. These were also the excerpts to which Dowson's family and friends objected, as well as seemingly Dowson himself. Yeats records that:

> Dowson wrote a protest against some friend's too vivid essay upon the disorder of his life, and explained that in reality he was living a life of industry in a little country village.[51]

Indeed, there is a very interesting letter from Dowson to Symons making explicit reference to "A Literary Causerie", although it is certainly not a protest, more a suggestion:

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[48] Frank Kermode, "Amateur of Grief," *New Statesman* 7 June 1963: 865.
[49] John Gawsworth, "The Dowson Legend," *Essays by Divers Hands* 17 (1938): 93.
[50] Conversation with Desmond Flower, 25 Mar. 1994. *Madame de Viole* was in the collection of Desmond Flower until January 1994. It is now in a private collection in Australia.
[51] W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* 327.

> Would you, however, mind toning down certain phrases on the *3rd* page of your proof ... "Abroad in the shadier quarters of foreign cities etc "... suggests the too hopelessly disreputable ... I have long since outgrown mine old 'curious love of the sordid' ... If at the same time you would suppress a too alcoholic reference to the cabman's shelter -- (for the "refused admittance" was to outsiders generally and not personal) substitute 'readier means of oblivion' or some such phrase for 'oblivion of alcohole', & if you *could* possibly find a less ignoble word than 'very dilapidated', there is nothing in your article which I have any objection to your publishing.[52] [*sic*]

Dowson was probably not being ironic, and Symons adopted some of the above suggestions, but the word "dilapidated" still appears in his account, as does the reference to a "curious love of the sordid". Endorsing his premature obituary by one to whom he once referred as a "silly bugger",[53] Dowson concluded, "I am fortunate in my chronicler".[54] In a period in which Wilde was preaching the doctrine of life imitating art, perhaps it suited him to think of himself as a truly decadent artist. A more incriminating article there could not have been.

Victor Plarr's slice of biography refers to "The Legend" as having become, "half diabolic" as early as 1914, but Plarr himself was reticent about many aspects of Dowson's life. Certain letters which he felt it politic to withhold in 1914 were subsequently published by his daughter in her novel *Cynara: The Story of Ernest and Adelaide*. The entire "Dowson Legend" is perhaps summed up by Yeats:

> I think none knew as yet that Dowson, who seemed to drink so little and had so much dignity and reserve was breaking his heart for the daughter of a keeper of an Italian eating house, in dissipation and drink; and that he might that very night sleep upon a sixpenny bed in a doss house.[55]

Yeats's inaccuracies are explicit, as is the fact that the evidence of Dowson's "dissipation" was largely concealed by the man who had "so much dignity and reserve".

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[52] *Letters* 371.
[53] *Letters* 318.
[54] *Letters* 371.
[55] W . B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* 303.

Many reports have it that Dowson was never particularly fastidious about his appearance. Rothenstein, a fairly close acquaintance, wrote that, "Dowson was homeless, miserable and unkempt",[56] but that he never knew Dowson, with his "beautiful nature", to lose his "gentle good manners".[57] The damage, however, is done. Similarly Harris, who was not known for being "generous to friends in misfortune",[58] begins his account of Dowson in a damning manner which no amount of benign recollection can later redeem. Sherard corroborates Gawsworth's judgement that those who left such damaging accounts of Dowson were largely those who did not know him well, since "during the seven or eight years that Dowson and I were friends, I never once heard Harris's name mentioned by him".[59] Harris actually implies that he was not well acquainted with Dowson, in that he recalls the exact number of times that he saw Dowson. "The second or third time that I saw him he was drunk, helplessly, hopelessly drunk".[60]

Dowson was much disadvantaged by the distance of his various homes from those of his friends, and he often stayed where he found himself either, because he had missed the last train, or from sheer exhaustion. This, as Longaker observes, was merely "youth sowing its wild oats",[61] but it is probable that these habits took their toll on his appearance. Conal O'Riordan's recollections would seem to support this view:

> Well, if to neglect to wash yourself is dirty, I have to confess that Ernest was dirty; but when in the early days of our acquaintance he came to my flat ... and I might say to him: 'Look here, you must have slept in your clothes last night, you'd better have a tub and I'll find you some fresh linen,' he always gladly acquiesced. A quarrelsome man, or one loving dirt for dirt's sake ... would have punched my nose.[62]

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[56] Rothenstein 238.
[57] Rothenstein 238.
[58] Robert Harborough Sherard, *Bernard Shaw, Frank Harris and Oscar Wilde* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1937) 277.
[59] Sherard 277.
[60] Harris 70.
[61] Longaker 187.
[62] Conal O'Riordan, "Bloomsbury and Beyond in the Eighteen-Nineties," *Essays By Divers Hands* 24 (1948): 81. Henceforth "Bloomsbury and Beyond in the Eighteen-Nineties."

O'Riordan also records the difficulty of keeping clean in the Latin Quarter of Paris without at least a "weekly visit to the public baths; and that was not easy to persuade him to do".[63] In Paris Dowson was, as is well recorded, very short of money. So the truth of the matter seems to be that Dowson was "at one time something of a dandy" but that, as his health and wealth declined, so did his appearance. Visual evidence still exists of the dapper young man up at Queen's in the late eighteen-eighties in the photographs in Flower and Maas's *Letters*, although his later shabbiness "made him a figure of pity to his friends".[64] Guy Thorne gives his impression of Dowson as "pale, emaciated, in clothes that were almost ragged. When he found a friend, his face would light up with a singular and penetrating sweetness that made one forget his untidiness ... which verged on offence".[65]

The most common picture of Dowson to have emerged is that of "a drunkard, a sloven, and -- to some uncertain degree -- a fornicator".[66] It is certainly true that "at 30 he could speak of being in old age", but not that he was "scarred by drunken fighting".[67] Many later commentators also took their cues from Symons in writing of a man "racked by coughing ... [and] more than ever a demoralised Keats".[68] Enter an unlikely champion in the form of a rather inaccurate and anonymous piece in *The Contemporary Review*:

> Some have depicted Dowson as an unkempt figure seeking out sordid haunts. This Dorian Gray figure will not do. Dowson was a fastidious dresser. When he was in form he donned a frock-coat from Savile Row and a topper worn at a rakish angle.[69]

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[63] Conal O'Riordan, "Bloomsbury and Beyond in the Eighteen-Nineties," 81.
[64] Phyllis Grosskurth, "Books Reviewed," *Canadian Forum* 48 Mar. 1968: 288.
[65] Quoted in William Kean Seymour, "Ernest Dowson's Letters," *Contemporary Review* Mar. 1968: 164.
[66] Rev. of *Ernest Dowson* by Mark Longaker *Times Literary Supplement* 31 Mar. 1945: 152.
[67] Frank Kermode, "Amateur of Grief," *New Statesman* 7 June 1963: 865.
[68] Frank Kermode, "Amateur of Grief," *New Statesman* 7 June 1963: 865.
[69] Ernest Christopher Dowson, "The Tragic Muse," *Contemporary Review*, Feb. 1969: 102.

Succinctly expressed, we have here the crux of the matter. Dowson favoured a peculiarly Anglo-French style of dress "when he was in form". Arguably, however, his malady contributed in no small part to his increasingly dishevelled appearance.

Symons's accounts of the personality of Ernest Dowson were the most damaging. Many mention Dowson's gentle good manners; more his drunkenness. Although Symons suppressed the "too alcoholic a reference" to the cabman's shelter, Dowson's frequenting of the shelters is a major issue in the memoir and one to which Gawsworth objects vehemently. According to Symons:

> I used to think he was at his best in a cabman's shelter. Without a certain sordidness in his surroundings he was never quite comfortable.[70]

Symons was not the only one to leave such an impression of the poet:

> There was a cabman's shelter near Hyde Park Corner where one could get supper of a kind, hot tea or coffee and thick bread and butter. Dowson liked the warmth of the place and the rough company.[71]

Dowson may have been "at his best" (in Symons's opinion) in a cabman's shelter, but it is doubtful that Symons ever encountered the poet in such circumstances. Dowson probably felt, as he felt with regard to his appearance, that he "never cared enough for this world to pose before it",[72] and "felt secure mixing with the lowly who seemed to accept him unquestionably".[73] Those such as Aubrey Beardsley and Gertrude Atherton, who were swift to condemn the poet's appearance late in his short life, were no doubt less comfortable company for him than those who would not judge him by the way he looked. Indeed, the "curious love of the sordid" upon which Symons insisted may have been no more than a means by which Dowson avoided censure and was accepted by men who knew him not as a poet but as a man.

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[70] Arthur Symons, introduction, *The Poems of Ernest Dowson*, xi.
[71] Rothenstein 238.
[72] Edgar Jepson, "The Real Ernest Dowson," 95.

Yet he was always keen to leave the East End where he was obliged to work at the dock. He never actively sought the "pothouses which swarm about the docks", as he may have done the company of cabmen. Edgar Jepson, who assisted Dowson when he finally quitted Bridge Dock, writes of a man who "always made haste, a daily haste, to get out of [the East End] as fast as he could",[74] and who "cast the dust of the loathed East End off his feet, and never saw it again".[75] In fact, he "much preferred the well-appointed bars and restaurants in the West End to the dingy smelly dives near the wharves",[76] and it was in precisely such *respectable* bars that Beardsley objected to finding Dowson.

Gawsworth also disputes Symons's memoirs of Dowson regarding "his own way of escape from life."[77] An "urge to oblivion" was, according to O'Riordan, "to forget that his father and mother had taken their own lives in despair".[78] What were these "readier means of oblivion" which Symons makes much of? Drugs, which Dowson experimented with on a few occasions only, and drink. Immoderate comments by Symons have led later commentators to assume that Dowson's drinking habits were excessive, but he was nowhere near the fictional character who was "drinking almost to madness".[79] Probably accurately, Frank Kermode remarks that Dowson:

> didn't take to drugs at Oxford. He wasn't for most of his life, a drunk (Plarr says so, but his standards were admittedly robust, since he took 'drunk' to mean 'lying in the gutter on one's back').[80]

Bonamy Dobrée, grossly inaccurate regarding other details of the life of Dowson, provides an even more friendly interpretation:

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[73] Ernest Christopher Dowson, "The Tragic Muse," *Contemporary Review* Feb. 1969: 100.
[74] Edgar Jepson, "The Real Ernest Dowson," 94.
[75] Edgar Jepson, "The Real Ernest Dowson," 95.
[76] Longaker 53.
[77] Arthur Symons, introduction, *The Poems of Ernest Dowson*, xvi.
[78] Conal O'Riordan, "Bloomsbury and Beyond in the Eighteen-Nineties," 84.
[79] Katherine Bregy, "Ernest Dowson: An Interpretation," *Catholic World* Nov. 1914: 196.

> that he gave way too easily to drink was probably because, like one of C. E. Montague's characters, he was 'born two sherries below par,' only with him it was absinthe.[81]

Ernest Dowson was a reasonably heavy drinker: there can be no question about that. It is evinced in both his letters and his work, such as the prose piece "Absinthia Taetra". Additionally, "he habitually drank without eating and so the alcohol quickly fumed in his brain".[82] What is called into question is the effect of a such a fuming of alcohol on his personality. There is a vein of criticism which seems determined to prove that under the influence of drink Dowson became "almost literally insane, certainly quite irresponsible".[83] The term "insane" is necessarily pejorative, but in Dowson's case insanity manifested itself in gestures of extravagant generosity:

> He would discover, through the comradeship of drinking, some literary derelict in a wine-shop, and give him all the money he had. Once he emptied his pockets to such a creature whom he had never seen before.[84]

Dowson was irresponsible with his sleeping arrangements, but never the belligerent figure many would have liked him to be. Like his sleeping habits, his propensity to drink took its toll on an already sick man. The "terrible craving for alcohol" which he undoubtedly suffered from was part and parcel of the consumption, "lying in wait for him in his blood".[85] "He was dogged with ill-health, a legacy from his parents, and his chosen intemperate life did nothing to improve his slight frame".[86]

Of his attachment to Adelaide, over fifty years after the Symons article was written a piece appeared stating Dowson's "unhesitating" acceptance of the "scope for a tragic love-affair ... as if content to have found his symbol. If poetry, as he

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[80] Frank Kermode, "Amateur of Grief," *New Statesman* 7 June 1963: 865.
[81] Bonamy Dobrée, "Fin de Siècle," *Spectator* Mar. 1945: 252.
[82] Conal O'Riordan, "Bloomsbury and Beyond in the Eighteen-Nineties," 81.
[83] Arthur Symons, introduction, *The Poems of Ernest Dowson*, by Ernest Dowson (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1905) xv. Henceforth *The Poems of Ernest Dowson*.
[84] Newman Flower, "Two Interesting Sinners," *Bookman* 70 Sept. 1926: 284.
[85] Arthur Symons, introduction, *The Poems of Ernest Dowson* xv.

believed, had to be visibly useless, and futile in the world's eyes, then a poet's love needed to be of the same kind".[87] Dowson may have liked Symons, in his capacity of chronicler, to depict him as a decadent, but he certainly never had a "vision of himself as bound to tragedy and destruction".[88] Furbank seems to believe that Dowson constructed for himself a Keatsian model of the "poetic life", but in Dowson's letters there is ample, and undoubtedly genuine, evidence of the "sleepless nights" and the "morbid and puerile tears"[89] shed while "this thing is killing me".[90] Despite this evidence, Furbank believes Dowson's love for Adelaide to have been only valid in the poetic sphere -- to have been mere posturing.

Dowson's relationship with Adelaide, which he so much feared being misunderstood, fared better at the hand of Symons than the rest of Dowson's life:

> She had at all events, the gift of evoking, and, in its way, of retaining, all that was most delicate, sensitive, shy, typically poetic, in a nature which I can only compare to a weedy garden, its grass trodden down by many feet, but with one small, carefully tended flower-bed, luminous with lilies.[91]

The horticultural metaphor is an elaborate, but pleasing, description of the effect of Adelaide Foltinowicz on Ernest Dowson. "Did she ever realise more than the obvious part of what was being offered to her, in this shy and eager devotion?"[92] asks Symons. Desmond Flower believes not: Adelaide, he suggests, was really "not very bright",[93] and age, intelligence, and "nationality" all conspired to prevent her from understanding what she meant to Dowson. Longaker, among others, records that many of Dowson's contemporaries were exasperated by the longevity of his "virginal devotion" to one so young and so incapable of understanding or reciprocating the

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[86] Ernest Christopher Dowson, "The Tragic Muse," *Contemporary Review* Feb. 1969: 100.
[87] P.N. Furbank, "Dropping Things," *Listener* 26 Oct. 1967: 542.
[88] Murray G. H. Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence* (London: Routledge, 1993) 137.
[89] *Letters* 362.
[90] *Letters* 217.
[91] Arthur Symons, introduction, *The Poems of Ernest Dowson*, xiii.
[92] Arthur Symons, introduction, *The Poems of Ernest Dowson*, xiii.

affection. It is almost certain, however, that had it not been Adelaide it would have been a similar adolescent who raised Dowson's poetic imagination to such a high pitch, given his attachment to young actresses such as Minnie Terry -- referred to affectionately as "Mignon".

The misunderstanding of the relationship was a post-Symons phenomenon. Plarr's refusal to speak on the issue ("And then the love affair! We will cut a long story short by saying simply -- it failed"[94]) fed "The Dowson Legend" by giving later commentators a void to fill. So the legend entered a new phase charting the "ridiculous impossible love for the daughter of the keeper of a restaurant":[95]

> What in a sense both made him and broke him was his ideal to young feminine innocence, which produced his first published poem; but shattered him when it came to his affair with 'Missie'. The last was disastrous, so that he wrote scarcely any poetry for the last four years of his life.[96]

Thus wrote Bonamy Dobrée in *The Spectator* of 1945. The first premise we can take to be correct; the second is marred by the common assumption that Adelaide was the inspiration for all Dowson's poetry from the time that he met her. It is an assumption also made by Symons who writes of "the young girl to whom most of his verses were to be written".[97]

Perhaps his attachment to Adelaide and the pain which her marriage caused him did stunt his poetic growth, but the last four years of his life were largely taken up with translating for Smithers in order to make a living. Dobrée might well have observed that 1899 was an *annus mirabilis* for Dowson in terms of publication, seeing the appearance of *Adrian Rome* and *The Memoirs of Cardinal Dubois*, as well

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[93] Conversation with Desmond Flower, Mar. 25 1994.
[94] Victor Gustave Plarr, *Ernest Dowson 1888-97: Reminiscences, Unpublished Letters and Marginalia* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1914) 103.
[95] Forrest Reid, "Ernest Dowson," *Monthly Review* June 1905: 107.
[96] Bonamy Dobrée, "Fin de Siècle" *Spectator* 16 Mar. 1945: 252.
[97] Arthur Symons, introduction, *The Poems of Ernest Dowson*, xii.

as *Decorations*. Additionally, Dobrée tellingly refers to "the last four years of his life", which itself implies a falling off in the health of the poet. Plarr's dismissal of the relationship is also an indication of the bathetic mood that pervades many commentaries about Dowson:

> In 1891 he fell hopelessly in love with a Lolita of thirteen ... daughter of the proprietor of a Soho restaurant haunted by Dowson. Two years later he proposed and was rejected.[98]

Frank Harris similarly reports that in conversation with Dowson he provoked the poet, "She had nothing in her, Dowson, or she'd never have preferred a waiter to you".[99] Harris's speech is somewhat blunt for one who confesses to having been only vaguely acquainted with Dowson.

Nevertheless, such is the manner in which the identification of "Cynara" with "Adelaide" has been established. Marion Plarr remarked that, "Cynara was Innocence and Innocence was Adelaide",[100] spotlighting the potentially biographical nature of the text. But, as Gawsworth points out, "in February 1891, when 'Cynara' was written [Adelaide] was only twelve years old, and not known at that period of her acquaintance with Dowson to be yet passionately adored."[101] To cite Adelaide as Cynara is to miss the essence of the matter. The Cynara of the poem is Dowson's homage to the ideal of innocence and can only function within the sphere of the text as a figure who evokes past joys.

A further question raised by reading the life of Dowson in the "Cynara" poem is that of prostitution. Undoubtedly, Dowson was not unfamiliar with the inside of some brothels, although "Johnson lectured him out of the Fathers upon chastity and

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98 Phyllis Grosskurth, "Books Reviewed," *Canadian Forum* 48 Mar. 1968: 288.
99 Harris 75.
100 Quoted in "The Dowson Legend," 48.
101 "The Dowson Legend," 98.

boasted of the great good done him thereby".[102] Yet as Fletcher points out, "'faithful to thee ... in my fashion' seems a maudlin euphuism [*sic*] for those harlots whom Dowson is presumed to have found cheaper than hotels".[103] "His desires and delusions had a Dickensian purity. He wasn't like Johnson impotent, but his taste for harlots was probably less depraved than Yeats suggests." Yeats describes Dowson as "full of sexual desire":

> A Rhymer had seen Dowson at some cafe in Dieppe with a particularly common harlot, and as he passed, Dowson, who was half-drunk, caught him by the sleeve and whispered, "She writes poetry -- it is like Browning and Mrs. Browning."[104]

There then follows a transcription of an incident in Dieppe shortly after Wilde's release in which Dowson persuaded Wilde to acquire a "more wholesome taste" at a brothel. The story has it that Dowson -- notoriously short of money -- emptied the contents of his pockets on to the table so that Wilde had sufficient money to do so. By the time Wilde left the brothel a crowd had gathered, and, though Wilde described the experience to Dowson under his breath as like "cold mutton", he proclaimed that the tale be told in England in order to restore his character. The tale highlights the loyal concern of one friend for another to the extent that Dowson was censured by the gathering as a "dirty" homosexual simply because he accompanied the then disgraced Oscar Wilde.[105]

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[102] W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* 311.

[103] Ian Fletcher, rev. of *The Poems of Ernest Dowson*, ed. Mark Longaker, *Listener* May 16 1963: 840.

[104] W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* 327. Arthur Symons recalled that:

> It was curious to note that Dowson, who was morbid and neurotic, told me he was more sexually excited by women's breasts than by any other part of woman's flesh. He was not abnormal, he was lacking in vitality; therefore he went after common whores in the worst quarters of London; these, apart from his drink, helped in killing him.

Arthur Symons, *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons*, ed. Karl Beckson. (London: Philadelphia University Press, 1977) 112.

[105] W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* 327-8.

Ernest Dowson was not a homosexual; neither was he a paedophile. Although his ultimate hope was to marry Adelaide Foltinowicz, "in his lucid moments Dowson knew that his union with her if consummated would destroy his notion of her".[106] But what of Adelaide? She has been much criticised for the fact that she married the tailor, but although she bore Noelte two daughters the marriage does not seem to have been a happy one, and it culminated in her death from septicaemia in 1902 following an abortion. It is comforting to read in Jepson's "The Real Ernest Dowson" that in his opinion, "those games [of cards] were the great delight of the child's wearisome day".[107] Thus we can feel that "Missie" derived a little pleasure from Dowson's "tragedy of misapplied aims and hours".[108]

What should emerge is a revised picture of Dowson, as a "decadent", but never depraved or degenerate as he has so often been made out to be. He harboured a chaste love for a child half his age, and he had an equally pure nature which led him to scorn pity from any source, and prevented him from burdening family and friends with his ill-health until he could stand no more. Sherard's fragment on the poet is strongly in defence of "poor Ernest Dowson" who "had been allowed to perish by his friends". But Dowson would have hated such an obituary.[109] When Marmaduke Langdale wrote in a letter to Dowson that, "I have created a sort of mist of trouble ... with which I surround you. It forms a sort of halo of sorrow for you and excites the tears and sympathy of those who live and admire you from afar!!!"[110] Dowson responded through an intermediary:

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106 Conal O'Riordan, "Bloomsbury and Beyond in the Eighteen-Nineties," 84.
107 Edgar Jepson, "The Real Ernest Dowson," 94-5.
108 William Kean Seymour, "Ernest Dowson's Letters," *Contemporary Review* Mar. 1968: 164.
109 "He, who scorned pity, has been pitied;" wrote Gawsworth in "The Dowson Legend," 93, and similarly Sir Newman Flower, in "Two Interesting Sinners," *Bookman* 70 Sept. 1926: 284, "but what a figure of pity, and how he hated pity!"
110 *Letters* 320.

> Do tell him (don't show him this letter) do suggest to him, without hurting his feelings, for I know he has really a great affection for me ... that I don't want no halo of this kind and extremely object to being wept over.[111]

A slight acquaintance records that he tried to persuade Dowson to "let friends know of his condition ... but he would not hear of anything that I suggested".[112] Even Symons recalls of Dowson that he had a "manner exquisitely refined".[113] This revealed itself in an "obstinate refusal to appeal to his relatives for help",[114] and it was only at the very end that he gave Conal O'Riordan leave to apply to his family for help "as soon as he could be moved to my flat at Bromley ... from Mrs Sherard's cottage".[115]

Similarly, while Beardsley was universally expressing his dislike of Dowson, the latter seemed oblivious, and his letters show a deep concern for the health of the artist. "You do not tell me where Beardsley is. I am glad he is mending".[116] There is no evidence of the "temperamental indecisiveness"[117] in his life which many have seized upon. The only feasible issue to which they could be referring is his deliberation over declaring himself to Adelaide's family. Yet who, even at the turn of the century, would not have balked at the thought of declaring himself to a girl of barely fifteen?

Even a collection of Dowson's letters issued by Cassell and Company in 1967 did not put paid to "The Dowson Legend". What is interesting is that Dowson's life, almost more than any other poet's, has influenced and indeed controlled readings of his poetry. All his commentators insist upon reading the life into the work. It is a shame that few of Dowson's contemporaries followed the example of Conal

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111 *Letters* 320.
112 George C. Williamson, "Ernest Christopher Dowson," *Carmina* 11 (1932): 333.
113 Arthur Symons, introduction, *The Poems of Ernest Dowson* x.
114 Forrest Reid, "Ernest Dowson," *Monthly Review* June 1905: 107.
115 Conal O'Riordan, "Bloomsbury and Beyond in the Eighteen-Nineties," 84.
116 *Letters* 345.
117 Arthur Mizener, "Reviews," *Modern Language Notes* June 1945: 424.

O'Riordan. "Today I speak of Dowson only as I knew him."[118] Instead, the prevailing picture is one of "un poète sans amis, sans famille, sans enfants, dégradé par sa misère et par l'ingratitude publique".[119] When Yeats demanded, "why are these strange souls born everywhere today?"[120] he was setting up the double paradox that the souls are at once estranged and set apart from the crowd as well as necessarily of it, as Dowson was.

Dowson has been made to stand as a representative figure of the decadent movement -- his life inextricably linked to his work. He has been viewed as a poet typical of English decadence in much the same way as Wilde, but without the homosexual association. Such a reading of Dowson's life has been detrimental to his art, since his poetry has been regarded as a by-product of a "poetic life". We need now to move away from an interpretation of Dowson which sees his work as derivative and platitudinous, towards an appreciative re-reading of Dowson's linguistic practices. His version of English decadence has been given grudging praise as a technically-proficient but pale imitation of French precursors. Nowhere in Dowson, critics have argued, do we find the moral and spiritual perversity which characterises French decadence, but simply "faults of pale emotion and commonplace phrasing".[121] Yet, as Aldous Huxley observed, "musical arrangements more elaborate than the simple periodical refrain are often used in Dowson's works ... Indeed, all Dowson's poetry possesses this quality of a music wearily drooping towards its close, trembling on the verge of silence".[122] Dowson's fondness for silence, for song, and his characteristically limited vocabulary and emotional range

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118 Conal O'Riordan, "Bloomsbury and Beyond in the Eighteen-Nineties," 81.
119 Charles Baudelaire, "Le Vieux Saltimbanque," *Le Spleen de Paris*, in *French Stories* ed. Wallace Fowlie (New York: Bantam, 1960) 147. " ... a poet without friends or family or children, degraded by his poverty and the ingratitude of his public."
120 W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* 315.
121 "Briefly Noted," *New Yorker* 1 Nov. 1947: 98.
122 Aldous Huxley, "Ernest Dowson" *The English Poets* 5, ed. Thomas Humphry Ward (New York: Macmillan, 1918) 602-3.

have been deprecated until comparatively recently. Linda C. Dowling in *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (1986) has made a significant change in the way we read those poets often described as "decadent" by highlighting their diverse and innovative uses of language at the fin de siècle. However, her study does not allow space for detailed discussion of Dowson's poetry or indeed his prose. Her arguments about Dowson's sense of an ending, his self-curtailment, and his preference for song over speech, as well as his technical achievements must all be viewed in the light of the changes which were occurring in the language at the end of the nineteenth century. Dowling also seems to suggest in places that Dowson's poetry is inferior to that of, for example, Lionel Johnson. "Where Johnson's seawinds cry, Dowson's merely sigh", observes Dowling, without fully examining the implications of the absence of utterance, and she moves on to deprecate his "obvious verbal borrowings".[123] Too many simple interpretations of Dowson's poetry and prose have focused on his often-repeated keynotes of regret, resignation, and death, seeing them as flaws and neglecting wider lexical issues. It is no longer sufficient to declare, as *The Athenaeum* recorded of *Verses*, that "[he] knows the language fairly well: if only he had something to say!"[124]

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123 Linda C. Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993) 203. Henceforth Dowling.
124 "Recent Verse," *Athenaeum* 13 Feb. 1897: 210.

Chapter 3:

Stylistic Influences

In 1886, Dowson was admitted as a commoner to Queen's College, Oxford.[125] W. R. Thomas, also at Queen's, recalls that Dowson "came up, of course, with a dislike for convention, and for what he held to be English insular hypocrisy".[126] According to Longaker, the Queen's of the mid-eighties "represented the more conservative thought of the time".[127] Still, the major influences on Dowson and his contemporaries were reasonably modern: Schopenhauer,[128] Pater -- specifically his novel *Marius the Epicurean* -- and, though Zola's novels were under ban during Dowson's time at Oxford, they were also a favourite. Plarr believed that Schopenhauer was the source of the pessimism which he detected among the undergraduates. The general tone of Queen's was, in truth, far from pessimistic or subversive. However, Dowson certainly carried with him an air of pessimism, for which Pater must take most of the responsibility. In 1890, almost two years after he had left Oxford, a form of Paterian pessimism was still with him, for he wrote to Moore:

> M. Aurelius's optimism -- wh. certainly had no "secret of cheerfulness "in it reduces itself to that last -- to the very blankest Pessimism -- the impression which Pater's epicureanism leaves on you is very much the same.
> ~~In the meantime~~ "For there is a certain grief in things as they are, "in man as he has come to be, as he certainly is, over & above those "griefs of circumstance which are in a measure removable -- an in-"explicable shortcoming or misadventure on the part of nature itself -- "death and old age as it must needs be, and that watching of their "approach, which makes every stage of life like a dying over & over "again" --
> No there is no "secret of cheerfulness" in Pater.

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125 I am indebted to Longaker's chapter "Five Terms at Oxford" 20-48, for much of the biographical detail since none of Dowson's letters survives from his Oxford days.

126 W. R. Thomas, "Ernest Dowson at Oxford," *The Nineteenth Century and After* (1928): 560.

127 Longaker 21.

128 For a detailed examination of the work of Schopenhauer on Dowson's prose see Chris Snodgrass, "Aesthetic Memory's Cul-de-Sac: The Art of Ernest Dowson," *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920* 35 (1992): 26-53.

> Excuse my boring you in this perfectly unnecessary way with these most trite & obvious reflections; I suppose certain lucky people ~~don't~~ aren't so constantly conscious of the general futility of things.[129]

Dowson, according to Thomas, "never changed the opinion, then formed, that Nature and humanity are, in the mass abhorrent, and that only those writers need be considered who proclaim the truth ... Optimism seemed to him either blind or insincere ... On the other hand, a sincere pessimism could please him in ungainly language".[130]

Though he never took his degree, Dowson's time at Oxford gave him the opportunity to read widely. As a commoner, he did not need the formal preparation usually demanded by the University, and though his knowledge of the classics was more than superficial, he undoubtedly had gaps in his education, for example, in geography and history. Thomas reports that Dowson was very fond of Maupasssant, Zola, and Baudelaire, but would have happily renounced the required undergraduate reading of Corneille, Racine, and Molière. Nevertheless, in the view of his tutors, Dowson excelled in his study of the Roman poets, and he was invited to read for honours. Horace, Catullus, and Propertius were his favourite poets at Oxford, though his interest lay in the substance of the text rather than in the discipline occasioned by study of the language. Though Thomas records that at Oxford, "Dowson's attitude towards a writer ... was based rather on matter than on style",[131] his letters show that literary style was undoubtedly important to Dowson.

Dowson's favourite French poet in the late eighties was Baudelaire, while his favourite novelist was Zola. Other favourites include Poe, Hawthorne, Swinburne, Musset, Gautier, De Quincey, and Henri Murger's *Scenes de la vie de Bohème*, which is often thought to have influenced Dowson's way of life. Additionally, the

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129 *Letters* 145.

130 W. R. Thomas, "Ernest Dowson at Oxford," *The Nineteenth Century and After* (1928): 561.

131 W. R. Thomas, "Ernest Dowson at Oxford," *The Nineteenth Century and After* (1928): 564.

aesthetic movement still loomed large over Oxford -- Pater and Wilde being its primary exponents. *Marius the Epicurean*, which advocated beauty as the supreme ideal in life, appealed more widely to the young men at Oxford than Wilde's self-advertisement.[132]

Traditionally, interpretations of the influence of Walter Pater on the poets of the nineties have focused on the extent to which they adopted Pater's philosophy as detailed in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. It is well known that Pater removed his "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* from the first edition lest young men should be misled by his entreaties to strive for:

> Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself ... To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.[133]

Yeats recalls that the members of the Rhymers' Club certainly "looked consciously to Pater for our philosophy",[134] but in "The Trembling of the Veil" he expresses concern that the "attitude of mind" which they imbibed from his work may have contributed to the early deaths of Johnson and Dowson. Many commentators have sought similarly to establish the extent to which the decadent poets, owing to their association with Pater, burned with "a hard gemlike flame ... to maintain [an] ecstasy".[135]

G. S. Fraser[136] has examined Pater's influence on three later writers: Samuel Butler, Max Beerbohm, and George Saintsbury. Butler, according to Fraser, saw no

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[132] Edgar Jepson recalls that, "for the one man I knew who modelled himself on Dorian Gray, I knew four who modelled themselves on Marius the Epicurean" *Memories* 120. However, this would have been after Dowson's time at Oxford since *The Picture of Dorian Gray* did not appear until 1891.

[133] Walter Pater, "Conclusion," *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873; London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1912) 250.

[134] W. B. Yeats, "Three or four years ago I re-read *Marius the Epicurean* expecting to find that I cared for it no longer, but it still seemed to me, as I think it seemed to us all, the only great prose in modern English", *Autobiographies* 302.

[135] Walter Pater, "Conclusion," *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873; London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1912) 250.

[136] G. S. Fraser, "Walter Pater: His Theory of Style, His Style in Practice, His Influence," *The Art of Victorian Prose*, ed. George Levine and William Madden (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) 201-23.

stylistic merit in either Arnold or Pater, both of whom he considered to be narcissistic in their condescension and cultivated charm respectively. Saintsbury appreciated the "high art of Pater's style",[137] and engaged in detailed prosodic notation of Pater's prose. The drawback as far as Saintsbury was concerned, however, was a "quietism" and lack of spontaneity. Max Beerbohm indulged his parodic talents at Pater's expense, though he saw value in the vision of life and the "couth solemnity" of his mind:

> Not that even in the more decadent days of my childhood did I admire the man as a stylist. Even then I was angry that he should treat English as a dead language, bored by that sedulous ritual wherewith he laid out every sentence as a shroud.[138]

As Fraser points out, the terms in which Beerbohm satirises him ("shroud", and "ritual") are Pater's own. Beerbohm views Pater's style as not decaying but already dead, perhaps also as a result of the subject matter of *Marius the Epicurean* and its concern with all the facets of death and decay.

What, then, does Dowson owe to Pater? He was certainly familiar with Pater's larger works -- *Marius the Epicurean, The Renaissance, Imaginary Portraits* and *Appreciations* -- calling him "the finest artist now with us",[139] but conceding that "it is a pity ... that Pater cannot write a *real* novel. If he had the concentration necessary it would be a book unsurpassable & unsurpassed".[140] He thought little of Saintsbury's initiative to establish "the sanity of genius", declaring it "Fudge!" and "as for Pater & Newman -- the two greatest men of the century, surely? I doubt if

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137 G. S. Fraser, "Walter Pater: His Theory of Style, His Style in Practice, His Influence," *The Art of Victorian Prose*, ed. George Levine and William Madden (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) 213.

138 Max Beerbohm, "Diminuendo," *Writing of the Nineties: From Wilde to Beerbohm*, ed. Derek Stanford (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1971) 48.

139 *Letters* 257.

140 *Letters* 21.

even British suburban criticism could discover much health or sanity in them!"[141] Dowson's comments suggest that he valued both Pater and Newman as stylists. He certainly valued Pater for his use of the "finest English" and for his "marvellous sayings".[142]

Pater, however, by suppressing the "Conclusion" clearly indicates his fear that precisely such "marvellous sayings" would detract from his stylistic message and unduly emphasise his philosophy. It is interesting to note that Dowson could not decide whether to designate Pater a novelist or a philosopher. He wrote to Moore in July 1889:

> Talk of Meredith talk of Thackeray -- talk of Zola (yes, Zola) -- they are powerful, brilliant, ingenious -- what you will - but when you come to delicacy -- subtlety -- there is only H. James & his master Tourguénef of novelists -- & of? -- semigods the one Pater.[143]

Dowson absorbed something of Pater's pessimism and sense of individuality but, on the whole, he was drawn to Pater as a literary stylist. On 3 January 1889, he wrote to Moore of Zola's *La Rêve*:

> He reminds me -- (excuse this desultory criticism) of Pater -- a strange conjunction but it is so. I suppose it is the superficial resemblance of incident to the last two pages of "Marius." ... I am thankful for the two of them -- but should like them hugely rolled into one.[144]

The incident to which he refers, the "extreme unction"[145] account of Marius's death, had a profound effect on Dowson and his poem of the same title clearly has its origin in Pater's work:

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141 *Letters* 146.

142 *Letters* 198.

143 *Letters* 93.

144 *Letters* 21.

145 Katherine Wheatley has also pointed out in her article "Ernest Dowson's Extreme Unction," *Modern Language Notes* 38 (1923): 315, that the poem owes much to Flaubert's description of the death of Madame Bovary.

> The purifying of the separate orifices of sensation with the consecrated oils strikes me as an excessively fine notion. I think if I have a death-bed (wh. I don't desire) I must be reconciled to Rome for that piece of ritual. It seems to me the most fitting exit for the epicurean -- after all one *is* chiefly that -- & one would procure it -- (it seems essentially pagan) without undue compromise or affectation of belief "in a sort of something somewhere", simply as an exquisite sensation.[146]

What appealed to Dowson was the Paterian secularism (or, in his words, paganism) in which art becomes a vehicle sufficient in itself to act as a substitute for religious experience and to combat the utilitarian world.

Significantly, Pater's secularism generates the first example of Dowson's shift towards Catholicism; a move prompted by his attraction to the sensual elements of the Church. The University had been High Anglican since the seventeenth century, but the Oxford of the eighteen-eighties experienced a trend of conversion to Catholicism amongst its undergraduates. Large enough to constitute a movement, the inclination towards Catholicism can be attributed in part to the influence of John Henry Newman. Though Dowson did not enter the Roman Catholic church until the autumn of 1891, as I shall record, he had always valued Newman highly, though as a stylist rather than for his religious views. In June 1890 he bemoaned his lack of funds to Arthur Moore, chiefly because:

> my ooflessness is such that I can't buy books even now & my shelves make me weep spleen when I consider how long it will be before they contain (i) Appreciations (ii) the complete works of Newman.[147]

His predicament led him to turn again to Pater's *Marius the Epicurean.*

Dowson clearly placed a higher value on Pater's literary style than on his general outlook, though he tried to reconcile himself to his "analytic habit" by recourse to Pater's philosophy:

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[146] *Letters* 21.
[147] *Letters* 149.

> Moore, mon vieux, this is a hyper-critical age & we who are so intensely modern are not out of it with impunity. We are "Sebastian van Storck." I must look out the quotation -- "And at length this dark fanaticism losing the support of his pride in the mere novelty of a reasoning so hard & dry, turned round on him *as our fanaticism will*, in black melancholy.[148]

"Sebastian van Storck", the third of Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*, is a wealthy young Dutchman who rejects the life around him in favour of "absolute selfishness, which could not, if it would, pass beyond the circumference of itself; to which ... with a fantastic sense of well-being, he was capable of a sort of fanatical devotion".[149] Pater explores a similar personality in the figure of Prosper Mérimée. Dowson wrote to Moore in December 1890:

> Have you read Pater in the 4tnightly? Do: it's full of marvellous sayings and curiously bloody.[150]

The conclusions which Pater draws in the article are not dissimilar to his remarks upon the personality of "van Storck". His analysis of Mérimée's style deduces that in literature such a cold impersonality produces a flawless structure but no "soul" in his style. Though he had recognised the link between the artist and the fanatical personality in his *Imaginary Portraits* of 1886, he remarks again in "Prosper Mérimée" that:

> The vocation of the artist, of the student of life or books, will be realised with something -- say! of fanaticism, as an end in itself, unrelated, unassociated ... The development of [this condition] is the mental story of the nineteenth century.[151]

Dowson's comments on "fanaticism" and modernity in a "hyper-critical age" relate directly to his own Hamlet-like inability to act "without thinking or reasoning about

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148 *Letters* 44.

149 Walter Pater, *Imaginary Portraits* (1887; London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1914) 109.

150 *Letters* 178. Presumably Dowson means that Pater is uncharacteristically harsh in his denunciation of Mérimée's style.

151 Walter Pater, "Prosper Mérimée," *Fortnightly Review* 283 (1890): 853.

it",[152] though his interpretation of "Sebastian" is much more literal than Pater intended. The failure of Sebastian's philosophy is shown in his lack of balance in his dealings with others and in the way in which he is finally ensconced in a lonely tower. His philosophy of life does little, as could be argued of Dowson, for his consumptive condition. Yet, unlike Sebastian, Dowson goes part of the way towards grasping Pater's message, demanding of Moore, "doesn't one risk missing some fine sensations by being too critically curious about the why & the wherefore of them?"[153] In the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* Pater states explicitly that:

> ... if we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable ... [the world] contracts still further: the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind.[154]

The argument is complex. Though Pater is reaffirming the value of individual impressions, in themselves these are too limited, so must be analysed with regard to time and the moment in order that "what is real in our life fines itself down".[155] His philosophy centres on the value of the individual's impressions, but only as they dissolve and are relocated in their origin, which is "physical life".

On the whole, however, Dowson owes a stylistic rather than a philosophic debt to Pater. To Dowson, Pater was "the finest artist now with us",[156] and Yeats observed likewise that he deemed Pater to have written "the only great prose in modern English".[157] Arthur Symons, too, in 1931, wrote:

> Has any imaginative critic ever absolutely fathomed what is most essential in that particular form we call Style? ... As for me, I had never written any

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152 *Letters* 44.
153 *Letters* 45.
154 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873; London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1912) 248.
155 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873; London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1912) 249.
156 *Letters* 257.
157 W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* 302.

> prose that satisfied me, nor had I achieved a style that seemed to me original, until, when I was seventeen, I read Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, which opened a new world to me, or, rather, gave me the key or the secret of the world in which I was living.[158]

Paradoxically, Symons seems to have derived his "originality" of literary style from pastiche, since much of his critical work has been judged by its similarity to Pater's style. Though the correspondence of literary style between Dowson and Pater is less explicit, Dowson clearly owes a debt to Pater's work, and in particular to the essay on "Style".

It was against the background of Victorian moral criticism that Pater's volume of *Appreciations* appeared in 1889. In the opening essay on "Style" Pater relocates the value of the art object within the individual perception. Ostensibly, Pater's theory of aesthetic criticism runs counter to mid-century criticism, of which Matthew Arnold was the prime exponent, and returns to a more romantic, subjective, criticism and literary style. Literary criticism of the eighteen-eighties largely preserved the tone of Victorian criticism as set out in Arnold's "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time", and "The Study of Poetry". For Arnold, the critical faculty is preparatory to the creative and has its place in seeing "the object as in itself it really is".[159] Pater's theory of criticism, both in *Appreciations* and in *The Renaissance*, does not wholly reject Arnold's objective of seeing the object "as in itself it really is". He accepts it, but only on the personal grounds that Arnold himself rejected.[160] Pater's quotations

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158 Arthur Symons, "To Warner Taylor," 1931, letter 153 of *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters, 1880-1935*, ed. Karl Beckson and John M. Munro, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989) 256.

159 Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," 12.

160 In "The Study of Poetry," *Matthew Arnold's Essays in Criticism*, ed. G. K. Chesterton, (1880; London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1966), Arnold identifies two fallacies which hinder the appreciation and study of poetry: the personal and the historical. In falling prey to the personal fallacy, "our personal affinities, likings, and circumstances have great power to sway our estimates of this or that poet's work" 237. The historical fallacy occurs because "by regarding a poet's work as a stage in [the development of a nation's language] we may easily bring ourselves to make it of more importance as poetry than in itself it really is". Critics "give themselves great labour to draw out what in the abstract constitutes the character of a high quality of poetry. It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete examples", 243-4. These concrete examples of excellence in poetry, of great

from Arnold, however, are not explicitly attributed, though he engages directly with Arnold's conception of poetry in the Preface to *The Renaissance*:[161]

> "To see the object as in itself it really is," has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever, and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to value it, to realise it distinctly.[162]

According to Laurel Brake, Pater conducts "tacitly a lifelong dialogue with his activist contemporary".[163] For Pater, the importance lies not in the object, but in the writer's own impression of the object. His objection to Mérimée's style lies in the transcription "fact" rather than "soul fact". But before he can achieve "soul fact" in his art the writer must fully comprehend his own sensations, since Pater's theory of style, and indeed criticism, hinges on the perception of these impressions. Pater's aesthetic criticism posits that the virtue of a work of art lies in its power, to a greater or lesser extent, to produce pleasant sensations.

The primary concern for a study of the influence of Pater's work on Dowson, therefore, must be the question of literary style and the communication of the individual impression. The essay on "Style"[164] is a shifting and digressive text. Pater turns his attention quickly from the criteria of good criticism to those of good style. He breaks down the traditional distinctions between prose and poetry with a

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"classics", Arnold calls "touchstones". Touchstones can provide the reader with "the superior character of truth and seriousness" 244.

[161] Ian Small argues convincingly in *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) that Pater's use of sources, particularly scriptural, undermines the nature of textual authority. According to Small, Pater's subversiveness lies in the fact that he indicates the manner in which he is using his textual authority, and at times fails to supply pointers towards its origin. "Authority for Pater ... resides in the individual: the authority of an utterance ... depends on the authority of the individual making the utterance, and not upon any consistent or verifiable "adducing of evidence" 104. Although Small's argument is in line with Pater's insistence upon the individual, it may also be the case that Pater felt Arnold's formula for good criticism to be too familiar to acknowledge.

[162] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873; London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1912) x.

[163] Laurel Brake, *Walter Pater* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994) 35.

[164] It is interesting to note that Robert Louis Stevenson's essay "On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature" (1885) appeared four years before *Appreciations* and makes many of the same points.

view to investing prose style with the inwardness and rhythm usually reserved for poetry; to make it exhibit "the rhythm which, as in Cicero, or Michelet, or Newman, at their best, gives its musical value to every syllable".[165] Pater's tone is urbane, and it is easy to be swept up in his argument even though the examples which he cites are disparate in their own prose styles. This is occasioned, as Ian Small suggests, by the "constant attenuation of sentences in which the reader's power to dissent is perpetually deferred", combined with the "magisterial Paterian 'we.'"[166]

Pater's own bias is clear in his assertion that "imaginative prose" is specially fitted as a medium for the literary artist in the modern world. The modern world, he notes, has such a "chaotic variety and complexity" of interests that it produces a condition of mind "little susceptible of the restraint proper to verse form".[167] More than this, he also accepts a part of what Arnold considers to be the historical fallacy.[168] In *The Renaissance* Pater suggests that:

> Antiquarianism, by a purely historical effect, by putting its object in perspective, and setting the reader in a certain point of view, from which what gave pleasure to the past is pleasurable for him also, may often add greatly to the charm we receive from ancient literature. But the first condition of such aid must be a real, direct aesthetic charm in the thing itself.[169]

Pater accepts Arnold's assessment of the value of the historical in terms of touchstones, but only if those touchstones are of significant aesthetic value in the present. The subjective authorial presence which Pater advocates is a reaffirmation of romantic principles in which the mode of perception is secondary to the perception itself. However, Arnold's mid-century insistence on the fidelity of literature to

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165 Walter Pater, "Style," *Appreciations With an Essay on Style* (1889; London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1924) 8. Henceforth "Style".

166 Ian Small, *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 94.

167 Walter Pater, "Style," 7.

168 See footnote 154.

169 Walter Pater, "Two Early French Stories," *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873; London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1912) 20.

experience is reflected in Pater's "soul fact", defined as "truth as expression, that finest and most intimate form of truth, the *vrai vérité*",[170] which he found lacking in Mérimée's style. According to Arnold, the moral force of poetry is dependent upon both its truth and its sincerity. Pater scarcely ever directly challenges Arnold's dictates, but "The School of Giorgione" proposes music rather than poetry as the model of the arts. The point here, I think, is that Pater consciously identifies himself as modern (and foreign), and in proposing music as the supreme artistic medium in which the correspondence of form and matter can be established he is seeking a mode of expression for the modern mind.

Despite their many differences, Arnold's "grand style" is not far removed from Pater's dictates about the "scholar-artist"[171] who will elevate the mind of the reader by classical allusion as well as by setting up textual challenges which will reward the reader by a "securer and more intimate grasp of the author's sense".[172] Arnold's prose style is conversational ("But stop, someone will say;"[173]), while Pater's language is clearly that of Oxford men in the eighteen-seventies and eighteen-eighties. In specific terms, the function of the artist, asserts Pater, is to oppose "the constant degradation of those who use [language] carelessly".[174] Pater then sets forth a case for good literary style as, "the finer accommodation of speech to that vision within".

Linda Dowling argues that the scholarly emphasis in both "Style" and *Marius the Epicurean* is the urging of a specifically written language. We can find justification for this on purely personal grounds. Edith Cooper, in "Michael Field's"[175] journal,

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170 Walter Pater, "Style," 32. It is worth noting here that in speaking of "truth" Pater employs a French phrase which implies an aestheticised form of "truth" divergent from British "truth".

171 Pater's choice of the phrase "scholar-artist" may well be a play on Arnold's "scholar-gipsy" -- again implicitly engaging with Arnold's text.

172 Walter Pater, "Style," 14.

173 Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," 32.

174 Walter Pater, "Style," 17.

175 "Michael Field" was the pseudonym of Katherine Bradley and her niece, Edith Cooper, who published verse dramas in the 1890s.

recalls hearing (or "overhearing", as Wilde would have it) Pater's lecture on Mérimée at the London Institution in the summer of 1890:

> Pater came forward without looking anywhere, and immediately read his "slips," with no preface, and into the midst of movements and coughs. He never gave his pleasant blue eyes to his audience -- there was a weight of shyness athwart them ... His voice is low and has a singular sensitive resonance in it, an audible capacity for suffering ... The even flow of his reading went on -- save when the same voice asked if all could hear.[176]

Such withdrawal marks him off further from Matthew Arnold. Jennifer Uglow argues that his reserve was "a shell to protect his sensibility",[177] which was perhaps heightened by the early deaths of his parents. Pater may well also, or as a result of this, have had an aversion from public speaking, though Dowling suggests that in his programme of stylistic regeneration he conceived of language as a written "dialect" whose spoken form is insignificant:

> that is, language frozen in writing and divorced from living speech in the philological sense ... For to urge composing English "more as a learned language" is to conceive of the language as a written dialect, whose spoken form is insignificant or non-existent.[178]

It is certainly true that Pater's prose appears to be composed for the printed page rather than for the voice -- perhaps owing to his dislike of public speaking -- and is devoid of the vigour and immediacy for which he strives:

> We cannot but regard this monotony of mood, this total absence of buoyancy or sparkle, as a serious limitation in Mr Pater's style.[179]

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[176] T. and D. C. Sturge Moore, eds. *Works and Days: From the Journal of Michael Field* (London: John Murray, 1933) 120.

[177] Jennifer Uglow, ed. *Walter Pater: Essays on Literature and Art* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1973) vii.

[178] Dowling 125. I assume here that Dowling is using the term "dialect" to denote written language, for she notes Pater's habit of doing so.

[179] Rev. of *Appreciations* by Walter Pater, *Pall Mall Gazette* 10 Dec. 1889: 3 *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage* ed. R. M. Seiler (London: Routledge, 1980) 199.

Contrary to Dowling's opinion, I would suggest that Pater was acutely aware of the *sound* of spoken English and "his idea of imaginative prose undoubtedly takes into account all the necessities of the modern mind seeking perfect utterance".[180] If this were not the case, there would be less emphasis on "all art constantly aspir[ing] towards the condition of music" in its fusion of matter and form. "The condition of music" is his ideal of art achieving correspondence between the "term and its import".[181] Although this seems an essentially philosophical idea rather than one which is concerned with sound, Pater's other references to music clearly show his affinity for it. In "Two Early French Stories", he praises a tale told in prose, "with its incidents and sentiment helped forward by songs ... a series of songs so moving and attractive ... not rhymed even, but only imperfectly assonant".[182]

So, while his primary message is the "finer accommodation of speech to that vision within", in order to bring a sense of immediacy to literature, Pater seems unable to accomplish this in his own prose. As Dowson observed of Pater's prose, "it is an exquisite, artificial, exotic, modern thing",[183] lacking the recommended qualities of simplicity and strength. The influence of the essay on "Style" on Dowson, I would suggest, is more extensive than that even of *Marius the Epicurean.* There are some elements of the essay which he wholeheartedly adopts. In effect, Dowson sees what Pater fails to: that the criteria for good style as defined in the essay on "Style" are best suited not to "imaginative prose" but to poetry.

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180 Albert J. Farmer, *Walter Pater as Critic of English Literature: A Study of Appreciations* (Grenoble: Éditions Didier et Richard, 1931) 90.
181 Walter Pater, "The School of Giorgione," *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873; London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1912) 140.
182 Walter Pater, "Two Early French Stories," *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873; London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1912) 18.
183 *Letters* 201.

Pater decries the "lawless" verse of the nineteenth century and also argues for the writer's operating with a compositional "sense of self-restraint and renunciation",[184] for:

> braced only by these restraints, he is really vindicating his liberty in the making of a vocabulary, an entire system of composition, for himself, his own true manner.[185]

Yet "the material in which [the artist] works is no more a creation of his own than the sculptor's marble".[186] Pater first introduced the idea of literary composition's being like sculpture in "The School of Giorgione", in which he suggests that the poet's aim, like that of the painter and sculptor, should be the fusion of the limited human form and its essence. As I have shown, in this essay Pater also introduces the idea of all art aspiring towards the condition of music, "It is the art of music which most completely realises this artistic ideal, this perfect identification of form and matter".[187] However, if language is given, the artist can never truly be creator of his vocabulary, as Pater would wish. Lee McKay Johnson suggests that neither the musical model nor that of sculpture is an adequate vehicle for Pater's argument since:

> music, like literature, is a temporal art, [and] it cannot serve Pater as a model for simultaneous unity. Thus, in the actual essay, the ideal form described is a *painting of a moment of music* -- and ideal which combines the fusion of form and content with the structure of the single moment. [my italics][188]

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184 It is worth noting that Dowson's method of composition was quite unlike that of Pater. While Pater made extensive revisions, taking his prose apart line by line, Dowson's poetry came as an effusion, usually in its final form. Any revisions which he made were largely concerned with punctuation, about which he was scrupulous.

185 Walter Pater, "Style," 10.

186 Walter Pater, "Style," 9.

187 Walter Pater, "The School of Giorgione," *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873; London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1912) 144.

188 Lee McKay Johnson, "Pater and the Structure of the Moment," *The Metaphor of Painting: Essays on Baudelaire, Ruskin, Proust, and Pater* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980) 228.

At best, then, the writer can only shape the language, as a sculptor would chisel his marble, into something unique to himself which will aid the presentation of his own sense of fact.

Dowson creates precisely such a vocabulary. His fondness for a few key words, as Linda Dowling notes, is indicative of his own sense of truth. If we consider "A Requiem", we see the extent to which Dowson was drawn to certain words and phrases:

> Neobule, being tired,
> Far too tired to laugh or weep;
> From the hours, rosy and gray,
> Hid her golden face away.
> Neobule, fain of sleep,
> Slept at last as she desired!
>
> Neobule! is it well,
> That you haunt the hollow lands,
> Where the poor dead people stray,
> Ghostly, pitiful and gray,
> Plucking with their spectral hands,
> Scentless blooms of asphodel?
>
> Neobule, tired to death
> Of the flowers that I threw
> On her flower-like, fair feet,
> Sighed for blossoms not so sweet,
> Lunar roses pale and blue,
> Lilies of the world beneath.
>
> Neobule! ah, too tired
> Of the dreams and days above!
> Where the poor, dead people stray,
> Ghostly, pitiful and gray,
> Out of life and out of love,
> Sleeps the sleep which she desired.

"Sleep", "death", and "flowers" are the keynotes of much of Dowson's poetry. The final line of the first and final stanzas is reminiscent of "Spleen", in which, "I was not sorrowful, but only tired / Of everything that ever I desired."

A further dimension of Dowson's poetic world is that of the "ghostly". The ghosts of "poor, dead people", with "spectral hands" appear in "St. Germain-en-Laye" ("white / gaunt ghost"), and "In a Breton Cemetery" ("dear dead people with pale hands"), as well as in "A Requiem". In limiting his vocabulary so, Dowson often repeats words and phrases between, as well as within, poems. In formal terms, the recurrent words and phrases in Dowson's poetry conform to the Nietzschean model in which each repetition is a shadow of the first, losing something with each occurrence. Rather than being a mimetic copy of the first (and gaining an incremental value), each repetition of the word "sleep" forfeits some meaning and becomes a paler reflection of its predecessor.

Edmund Chandler[189] has made a detailed examination of the textual history of *Marius the Epicurean*, listing the words which occur most frequently in the final version. Dowson's vocabulary emerges as very similar to Pater's in the novel, since both writers favour words such as "dead", "flowers", "gray", "white", "fair", and "pure" -- characteristically words of only one or two syllables, suggesting that Dowson, whether consciously or unconsciously, assimilated something of Pater's vocabulary.

Pater's views on stylistic ornament are realised in Dowson's poetry, both in the paring down of his vocabulary and in the way in which he employs the "tact of omission" praised by Pater. His affinity for certain words and phrases produces, as Dowling notes, a code by which to live his poetic life. Yet Pater's influence permeates more deeply than this, for we find in Dowson's poetry this "tact of omission",[190] manifesting itself not only in his vocabulary but also in his limited use of connective material.

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[189] Edmund Chandler, *Pater on Style: An Examination of the Essay on "Style," and the Textual History of "Marius the Epicurean"* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1958).

[190] On March 5 1889 Dowson wrote to Moore, "The girl wrote a nice letter. I have written her one ... I should like to have shown it to you; I recognise in it, thou' I say it as shouldn't what Pater calls a

As Dowling observes, "Paterian self-curtailment is an ideal that appeals to Dowson both in prose and verse".[191] But the self-curtailment in Dowson's verse is not derived solely from Pater. Verlaine's[192] poetry appealed to him enough to merit the translation of several poems, including "Spleen", the third of the "After Paul Verlaine" sequence in *Decorations*:

Spleen

Around were all the roses red,
The ivy all around was black.

Dear, so thou only move thine head,
Shall all mine old despairs awake!

Too blue, too tender was the sky,
The air too soft, too green the sea.

Always I fear, I know not why,
Some lamentable flight from thee.

I am so tired of holly-sprays
And weary of the bright box-tree,

Of all the endless country ways;
Of everything alas! save thee.

Though it is a translation, "Spleen" nevertheless employs Dowson's favourite techniques of repeating words, using flowers as symbols, and his keynote of languor. Clearly, the very brevity of Verlaine's style appealed to him. In the first couplet, the use of the word "around" in both lines conveys not only his encirclement by the roses and the ivy, but also the bind in which he is caught. Here, the repeated word has the function of stressing that he is a captive of things "around" him, as well as suggesting that the roses and ivy are unnaturally coloured. Verlaine's construction gives a more pronounced sense of the plants being all one colour and plays down the

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"delicate tact of omission."" *Letters* 45. Almost all of his surviving correspondence, however, displays quite the reverse!

[191] Dowling 208.

element of entrapment. Arguably, Dowson's version of the poem makes the repetition more effective than the original, since the French language demands that Verlaine's use of the same word should be in different forms, hence, "Les roses étaient toutes rouges, / Et les lierres étaient tout noirs."[193]

In the final two stanzas, it seems almost as if he is too tired even to repeat that "I am so tired", for the final stanza is dependent on the one which precedes it. Between these two states falls an interruption of the state of languor. The penultimate couplet, ostensibly reflecting the poet's weariness, has an enlivened rhythm which contradicts the meaning. This is not so in Verlaine's original poem, ("Du houx à la feuille vernie / Et du luisant buis je suis las"), where the rhythm reflects the languorous mood. But Dowson sets up an interesting paradox in the way in which the image and rhythm of the "bright box-tree" belie the fact that he is "so tired" of it. This is countered, however, by the weakness both of sentiment and of rhythm in the final stanza.

According to the essay on "Style", the literary artist must also recognise the changing nature of language, as well as the "historic sense", and restore the "finer edge of words still in use".[194] Pater cites words such as "ascertain", and "communicate", as examples of words which have been "misused" and need their precise meaning restored. Dowson rarely uses such words in his prose and never in his poetry. The sense of the historical in Dowson's poetry, as in much nineties verse, manifests itself in a resurrection of archaisms, such as "betwixt", and spelling variants, such as "enchaunted".

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[192] I shall make a more detailed examination of the influence of Verlaine on Dowson, most specifically the concept of "Romances sans Paroles," in a later chapter.

[193] Paul Verlaine, "Spleen," *Romances sans Paroles*, ed. D. Hillery, (London: Athlone Press, 1976) 65-66. The precise meaning is something like "The roses were entirely red / And the ivy was completely black."

[194] Walter Pater, "Style," 13.

The poetic forms which he favoured, such as the rondel and villanelle, date back to the thirteenth century, while his fondness for Latinate words looks back partly to Pater's late Rome.[195] Dowson's acceptance of fixed French poetic forms seems to operate within the confines of Pater's dictates upon "the restraint proper to verse form."[196]

Many of Dowson's poems exhibit restraint in their very brevity. The economy of a poem such as "Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam", is especially fitting since the poem is a meditation upon the shortness of life:

> *Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam*
>
> They are not long, the weeping and the laughter.
> Love and desire and hate:
> I think they have no portion in us after
> We pass the gate.
>
> They are not long, the days of wine and roses:
> Out of a misty dream
> Our path emerges for a while, then closes
> Within a dream.

"Vitae summa brevis" laments that not only are "the days of wine and roses" fleeting, but also "the weeping and the laughter." As Arthur Symons observes in his introduction to *Verses*:

> He was quite Latin in his feeling for youth, and death, and "the old age of roses," and the pathos of our little hour in which to live and love.[197]

The sentiment is not only Latin however, but also undoubtedly secular.[198] The poet is concerned with earthly emotionalism far more than with what happens "after we

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[195] Although Dowling argues in her article, "The Aesthetes and the Eighteenth Century," *Victorian Studies* 20 (1977): 357-77, that the eighteenth century influenced Dowson's work, it is as well to remember that the only piece which could really claim to be eighteenth century in tone, *The Pierrot of the Minute,* is an anomalous piece, a commission, written in just over two weeks. Moreover, the arguments which Dowling puts forward in this essay are mainly concerned with style and tone, which Dowson takes from Pater and Pater's influences in no small part.

[196] Walter Pater, "Style," 7.

pass the gate." He sees life not as a dream but as a respite, a time of "wine and roses", which is finite. Yet Dowson in 1896, when he wrote the poem, had certainly decided that prospects in the secular sphere were inferior to those of Christianity.

Many of Dowson's letters rank Newman just behind Pater as a stylistic influence. Newman's move from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism had been significant enough to cause a movement of similar conversions at Oxford, but by the time Dowson entered Queen's their number was diminishing. Undoubtedly, however, the atmosphere at Oxford effected by Newman made some impression upon Dowson's religious beliefs. Moreover, his friend Lionel Johnson was not only a committed Catholic, but also acquainted with Newman and Pater. "I had an evening with Johnson on Wednesday", Dowson wrote to Moore in August 1890, "he had just been to Newman's requiem Mass with Pater at the Oratory."[199] Dowson's drift towards Catholicism can be traced through his letters to Moore between 1889 and 1891. In May 1891 he wrote:

> How do you proceed with Newman "on Miracles"? It was an ill beginning: read the Catholic sermons, the volume on various occasions and that to mixed congregations: personally I think them the finest prose I have met with outside Pater ... [Newman] strikes me not in the least as one of those, with a genius of conviction like St Paul or Pascal, but rather as of a temper essentially subtile & sceptical, resembling Butler's: & his Catholicism was the deliberate conclusion of a logical process, and not at all emotional or the issue of early prejudice: that is contradicted by his letters. His faith was not spontaneous and direct like Pascal's, but a reasoned state of mind conditioned on assent to certain intellectual propositions, which strike me, as at least, as worthy of serious consideration, as the flimsy and local claims of Anglicanismus & the Protestant sects ... But I am so tired of Anglican condescension and Latitudinarian superiority; where Rome is in question. That, and the vulgarity of the dogmatic atheists, and the fatuous sentimentality of the Elesmere[200] [*sic*] people et hoc genus omne! I am afraid, my dear, I am being driven to Rome in self-defence.[201]

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197 Arthur Symons, introduction, *The Poems of Ernest Dowson*, xxiv-xxv.

198 For an alternative view see Nathan Cervo, "Dowson's 'Vitae Summa Brevis," *Explicator* 46 (1987): 36-9.

199 *Letters* 159. The requiem mass was held at Brompton Oratory on 20 August 1890.

200 Dowson is almost certainly referring to Mrs Humphry Ward's novel *Robert Elsmere* (1888), which expressed the views of a wider movement that Christianity could be revitalised by focusing on the social mission of Christianity rather than on the miraculous. In March 1889 he wrote to Moore, "I

Dowson's Catholic faith has been seen as largely sentimental, as an anonymous article in *The Saturday Review* illustrates:

> it was entirely with [him] an affair of sentiment and curiosity -- if one may so say, it was as if [Dowson was] wholly enamoured of, intoxicated by the mere sensuous colour of Roman Catholicism.[202]

Yet his letter to Moore suggests a more reasoned approach which has so far been overlooked.[203] Dowson's stress on the "logical process" of reasoning reflects his own shift towards Catholicism more than Newman's, but it was a view shared by others, including Wilde:

> About Newman I think that his higher emotions revolted against Rome but that he was swept on by Logic to accept it as the only rational form of Christianity.[204]

Newman states his own views clearly in the *Apologia pro Vita Sua* and in *A Grammar of Assent*, where he postulates that there are two sources of religion: the first is man's sense of the futility of life and his general estrangement from the world; the second is found in the answer to such estrangement, reconciliation through the rites and ideas of religion. According to Newman, both are necessary for the existence of religion.

Dowson's sense of estrangement from the world was at its height in the late eighteen-eighties and early eighteen-nineties, just before his conversion to

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invested in "Robert Elsmere" on Wed. & have been unable to tear myself away from it", *Letters* 49. Mrs Humphry Ward was also the niece of Matthew Arnold.

201 *Letters* 198.

202 "Miserrimus," *Saturday Review* 17 June 1905: 808.

203 Jean-Jacques Chardin, while acknowledging that Dowson's conversion was neither sudden nor irrational, doubts that the Oxford Movement was in any way responsible for Dowson's conversion to Catholicism because, "Dowson ne connaissait pas les Pères fondateurs du Mouvement d'Oxford du temps de son séjour a l'Université," and also because he only became interested in Newman several years after he had left Oxford. He attributes Dowson's Catholic tendencies to "la fascination ressentie pour les splendeurs du rite catholique romain". Chardin views Dowson's conversion as simply a means of bridging the gap between the reality of his life and his dreams and desires.

204 Letter to William Walsford Ward, qtd. in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988) 63.

Catholicism. As he observed to Moore, he was "constantly conscious of the general futility of things".[205] As a result, in September 1891 he felt himself "driven" to the Catholic church. Dowson's parents were nominal Anglicans, and, excepting some early instruction by an Italian priest, he had no strong Anglican or Catholic influences and followed a reasoned path towards Roman Catholicism: far more reasoned than has previously been thought. In his denunciation of Latitudinarianism[206] and "Anglican condescension" Dowson expresses a desire to reaffirm the Catholic inheritance latent in Anglicanism which some wished to deny.

Dowson's version of Catholicism was, like Newman's, grounded in personal experience and reasoning rather than in early influences. It stems both from his sense of estrangement from the world and from the "better half" of himself which Newman called "Conscience". Dowson wrote to Moore in April 1889 that, "I seem to have the spleen to-night, though I don't quite know why I should -- having no special grievance that I can precisely fix".[207] In the same month he wrote to Charles Sayle:

> So you are a Catholic! I envy you hugely: Catholicism is about the only beautiful 'ism' left nowadays and I feel many degrees closer to you than when you dubbed yourself Anglican.[208]

In Newman's view, Conscience is that within the individual which draws him to, and indeed demonstrates, religious belief:

> He who has once detected in his conscience the outline of a Lawgiver and Judge, needs no definition of Him ... and he rejects the mechanism of logic, which cannot contain in its grasp matters so real and recondite.[209]

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205 *Letters* 145.

206 The Latitudinarians -- so-called by their opponents in the Church of England -- were generally considered to attach too little importance to, among other things, church organisation.

207 *Letters* 60.

208 *Letters* 58.

209 J. H. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, repr. in *A Newman Treasury: Selections from the Prose Works of John Henry Cardinal Newman*, ed. Charles Frederick Harrold, (1870; London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943) 289.

In other words, Newman suggests that it is the Conscience rather than the Intellect which shows the existence of God. Arnold, Pater, and Dowson all reflect Newman's thinking in emphasising the importance of individual perception. Moreover, all three recognise an élite class, whether spiritual or literary. This is most evident in Dowson's defence of child actresses, "The Cult of the Child", in which he argues that:

> there are persons who are incapable of delighting in the childish character. But with these we need hardly concern ourselves. it is enough that there are an ever increasing number of people who receive from the beauty of childhood, in art as in life, an exquisite pleasure.[210]

Pater, however, though he looked to Newman as a model of literary style, could never fully accept nor reject Christian beliefs.

In *The Idea of a University*, Newman argues that literature is personal, and indeed Pater's stress on the literary reflection of the writer's vision is undoubtedly derived from Newman. Pater greatly admired Newman's literary style -- its simplicity, directness, and lack of "surplusage" -- though his final thoughts on style are very different from Newman's. Newman's literary style is characterised by a simplicity and an informality, though there are elements of high rhetoric. Not the most vivid language, it is nevertheless powerful, working on what Newman called the principle of "economy" -- adaptation of the means of communication to suit the needs of the audience. According to Newman, communication is possible only if there is some form of concession made to people's varying levels of understanding, vocabularies, and experiences:

> Life passes, riches fly away, popularity is fickle, the senses decay, the world changes, friends die. One alone is constant; One alone is true to us; One alone can be true; One alone can be all things to us; One alone can supply our needs; One alone can train us to our full perfection; One alone can give a

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[210] Ernest Dowson, "The Cult of the Child," *The Critic* 17 Aug. 1889 Rpt. in *Letters* 433-5.

> meaning to our complex and intricate nature; One alone can give us tune and harmony; One alone can form and possess us.[211]

R. H. Hutton has attempted to define what it was about Newman that attracted the attention of the Oxford undergraduates. The first characteristic he identifies is that he was "so clear and so emphatic in [his] recognition of the actual facts of life". It seems, therefore, that despite his elevated status within the Church, Newman was not removed from the secular and the reality of life, as his *Apologia pro Vita Sua* bears witness. Hutton next remarks upon the calmness with which Newman sets forth "actual facts", observing that, "[this] is just the way to take the ears of young men, to tell them that you want to put edification for a moment aside, and to face the facts of the world as they are, without moralising or preaching".[212]

According to Hutton, this was not his only tactic for catching the attention of young men. By direct address, such as "attend to me", he introduces an element of the personal. It is not a dictatorial address, but rather a recognition that the attention-span of the congregation may be limited. If we take a representative passage from *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations* (1849), Newman states that, "I am saying nothing very abstruse, nothing very difficult to understand, nothing unimportant; but something intelligible, undeniable, and of very general concern".[213] The first three qualities are presented in the negative, including the final element, which leads on to the more forceful statement that what he is saying is "intelligible, undeniable, and of very general concern". The listener is again compelled to take notice, on an equally personal level, of something which he is being told he already

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211 J. H. Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons* repr. in *A Newman Treasury: Selections from the Prose Works of John Henry Cardinal Newman*, ed. Charles Frederick Harrold, (1834-43; London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943) 340.

212 Richard H. Hutton, *Cardinal Newman* (London: Methuen and Co., 1891) 99.

213 John Henry Newman, "Saintliness the Standard of Christian Principle," *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations* (1849; London: Burns, Oates and Co., 1871) 84-5.

understands. As I have shown with Pater's literary style, the reader or listener's power to dissent is diminished.

But, as Hutton observes further, Newman's criticism is always guarded when he speaks of human weakness. In "God's Will the End of Life", also collected in *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations*, Newman simply lists some human failings:

> Alas! alas! how different will be our view of things when we come to die, or when we have passed into eternity, from the dreams and pretences with which we beguile ourselves now! ... Alas for those who have had gifts and talents, and have not used, or have misused, or abused them; who have had wealth, and have spent it on themselves; who have had abilities, and have advocated what was sinful, or ridiculed what was true, or scattered doubts about what was sacred.[214]

He does not preach damnation for those who have committed these misdemeanours; he merely reminds the reader of what he knows already: his fate at Judgement Day. Newman's habit of listing the points he wishes to stress, interspersed here with the cry of "alas", makes his literary style highly memorable.

Hutton concludes that it is the "reality of mind" which was one of the most important aspects of Newman's preaching. However, his "realistic" approach was being assessed by one of his own circle. The potency of his style stems from the accumulation and repetition of words and phrases. Newman never preached in the declamatory manner:

> I have been obliged to take great pains with everything I have written, and I often write chapters over and over again, besides innumerable corrections and interlinear additions ... I have never written for writing's sake ... [but only] to express clearly and exactly my meaning.[215]

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214 John Henry Newman, "God's Will the End of Life," *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations* (1849; London: Burns, Oates and Co., 1871) 122.

215 J. H. Newman, *Letters and Correspondence* II repr. in *A Newman Treasury: Selections from the Prose Works of John Henry Cardinal Newman*, ed. Charles Frederick Harrold, (1834-43; London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943) 21.

R. H. Hutton also remembered Newman's voice and manner as, "singularly sweet, perfectly free from any dictatorial tone, and yet rich in all the cadences proper to the expression of pathos, of wonder, and of ridicule".[216] Gladstone described Newman's method of preaching to undergraduates as vicar of St Mary's and chaplain of Littlemore:

> Dr Newman's manner in the pulpit was one about which, if you considered it in its separate parts, you would arrive at very unsatisfactory conclusions. There was not much change in the inflexion of the voice; action there was none. His sermons were read, and his eyes were always bent on his book; and all that ... is against efficiency in preaching ... but you must take the man as a whole, and there was a stamp and seal upon him; there was a solemn sweetness and music in the tone; there was a completeness in the figure, taken together with the tone and with the manner, which made even his delivery, such as I have described it, and though exclusively from written sermons, singularly attractive.[217]

David DeLaura highlights the varied appeal of Newman's literary manner, citing Arnold as one who believed it could counter what he perceived to be the contemporary failings of mind, spirit, and temper. His style was invested with an individuality akin to that of an "earnest letter". Such individuality, according to DeLaura, conforms to Pater's principles of reserve and tact as set out in the essay on "Style". In his very simplicity of style, Newman employs an art: an art which makes his manner *seem* instinctive. It is, in fact, an art which conceals art. This tone of "effortless freedom" is what Pater advocates in "Style", though in the case of Newman, it may, in fact, conceal a dictatorial mode of address. Moreover, it is curious that the method of composition employed by Newman was remarkably similar to that of Pater's continual re-working of his prose.

However, a distinction must be drawn, as DeLaura points out, between the different functions of style for both artists. For Newman it is a matter of spiritual

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[216] Quoted in Charles Frederick Harrold, introduction, *A Newman Treasury: Selections from the Prose Works of John Henry Cardinal Newman*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943) 23.
[217] Richard H. Hutton, *Cardinal Newman* (London: Methuen and Co., 1891) 97-8.

integrity, while Pater's concern is with aesthetic "tact" and delicacy of expression. But:

> the cult of Newman the supreme artist in prose ... establishes one more crucial line of that still rather puzzling continuity descending from Newman and the Oxford Movement to aestheticism.[218]

The question, then, is how does Dowson's own prose style relate to that of Newman? The answer, I think, is that in concrete terms, Dowson absorbed little or nothing of Newman's style. What he derived from Newman, probably via Pater, is a similarity of tone and a focus on the individual, rather than any theological impetus.

However, "Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration" articulates Dowson's sense of a spiritual élite as well as the importance of the individual perception. The nuns "have serene insight / Of the illuminating dawn to be" for:

> They saw the glory of the world displayed;
> They saw the bitter of it, and the sweet;
> They knew the roses of the world should fade,
> And be trod under by the hurrying feet.

The nuns have a heightened perception of the world and, finding it unfavourable, have closeted themselves away so that "it is one with them". The stanza quoted above reflects the depth of their vision by the incremental effect of beginning three lines with the word "they". Such a simple method is characteristic of Dowson, who, as I have shown, favoured repetition. "Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration" demonstrates, as do all his religious poems, the attraction of the church for Dowson.

The final chapter of *Marius the Epicurean*, "Sunt Lacrimae Rerum" -- interestingly, the chapter which Dowson quotes extensively in his letter to Moore -- indicates Pater's awareness of the need for some form of religion. At the end of the

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[218] David J. DeLaura, "Newman and the Victorian Cult of Style," *Victorian Newsletter* 51 (1977): 10.

novel, although Marius essentially retains his aestheticism, he is alert to the "great hope" of something better:

> amid the memory of certain touching actual words and images, came the thought of the great hope, that hope against hope which, as he conceived, had arisen ... upon the aged world.[219]

On the whole, Dowson follows Pater's interpretation of Newman, favouring a mixed culture of religion and secularism. But there is none of the tension in Dowson that we find in Pater between a secular Hellenism and the desire to be able to accept some form of religious belief. Clearly Dowson did not suffer such acute difficulties in accepting Christian doctrine, though he may well have resolved any doubt he felt by recourse to Newman's works.

In the wake of Newman's conversion in 1845, several hundred conversions occurred at Oxford, including that of Gerard Manley Hopkins in 1866. I would suggest that Dowson's commitment to Roman Catholicism in the late eighteen-eighties and early eighteen-nineties was a more considered one than is commonly thought, but that by the mid-nineties he had drifted towards a more sentimental faith. Several of his short stories depict the sensual aspect of the church which attracted him to it:

> I was later than the hour appointed; vespers were over and a server, taper in hand, was gradually transforming the gloom of the high altar into a blaze of light ... the incense began to fill the air, and the Litany of Loreto smote on my ear to some sorrowful, undulating Gregorian ... Strophe by strophe that perfect litany rose and was lost in a cloud of incense, in the mazy arches of the roof.[220]

Newman deplored such sentimental attachment to the church:

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[219] Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, ed. Jennifer Uglow (1885; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 295.

[220] Ernest Dowson, *The Stories of Ernest Dowson*, ed. Mark Longaker (London: W. H. Allen Ltd., 1946) 46-7. Henceforth *Stories*.

> Beware lest your religion be one of sentiment only, not of practice. Men may speak in a high imaginative way of the ancient Saints and the Holy Apostolic Church, without making the fervour or refinement of their devotion bear upon their conduct.[221]

However, renouncing worldliness always appealed to Dowson in both the secular and the spiritual sphere. His handful of religious poems demonstrates his urge for spiritual renunciation, even if he was not prepared to commit himself to it. "Carthusians", collected in *Decorations*, indicates the appeal of the cloistered life to him:

> Within their austere walls no voices penetrate;
> A sacred silence only, as of death, obtains;
> Nothing finds entry here of loud or passionate;
> This quiet is the exceeding profit of their pains.

His choice of the Carthusian Order to represent the solitude of those who forsake "the world's wisdom and the world's desire ... to dwell alone with Christ" also encompasses three of his favourite poetic, rather than religious, subjects: France, since the order was founded in 1084 at the Grande Chartreuse; the vow of silence; and white, the colour of the Carthusian habit. Dowson wrote several poems on religious subjects, though none seems to relate directly to his own experiences within the church.[222]

As I have suggested, Newman's influence on Dowson was fundamentally one of tone. Isobel Armstrong, in *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*,[223] posits that Clough's poetry, specifically *The Bothie of Tober-Na-Vuolich*, refutes one of Newman's most fundamental assumptions of Tract 90. Tract 90, published in 1841,

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221 J. H. Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, repr. in *A Newman Treasury: Selections from the Prose Works of John Henry Cardinal Newman*, ed. Charles Frederick Harrold, (1834-43; London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943) 238.

222 According to Desmond Flower, "Carthusians" was written in May 1891, just prior to Dowson's conversion to Catholicism.

223 Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993) 178-192. Henceforth Armstrong.

is an examination of the compatibility of the Thirty Nine Articles with Catholic doctrine in which Newman asserts that the real presence of Christ is spiritual and found most truly in the Eucharist:

> The *presence*, then, of a thing is a relative word, depending ... upon the channels of communication between it and him to whom it is present ... In answer ... to the problem, *how* Christ comes to us while remaining on high, I answer just as much as this -- that He comes by the agency of the HOLY GHOST, *in* and *by the Sacrament* ... the Sacrament is the means of His spiritual presence.[224]

Armstrong calls the Tract a "disquisition on invisibility",[225] a discussion of the secondariness of the material presence. Clough's poetry, according to Armstrong, "with a blasphemous materialist empiricism ... makes the body essential to relationships". Indeed, the protagonist in *The Bothie* longs for the physical presence of his lover rather than the spiritual presence with which Dowson is content.

It is, I think, through the work of Pater that Dowson's relationship to Newman needs to be viewed. From Newman's *Idea of a University* Pater learned to "plunge into the deep realities of the spiritual mind," and it is this solipsism that Dowson, through Pater, inherited from Newman. Where Clough emphasises the importance of the material, specifically the body, the women -- or girls -- who appear in Dowson's poetry are ethereal.[226] Moreover, as in "April Love", it is not clear whether the addressee, the "other" of the "we", is present or not:

> We have walked in Love's land, a little way,
> We have learnt his lesson a little while,
> And shall we not part at the end of day,
> With a sigh, a smile?

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224 J. H. Newman, *Tract XC on Certain Passages in the XXXIX Articles* (1841; London: James Parker and Co., 1903) 57-60.

225 Armstrong 190.

226 Murray Pittock, in "Dowson and Clough," *Notes and Queries* 232 (1987): 501-2, has made a case for seeing Dowson and Clough as part of an English tradition of later "Victorian poets of doubt", suggesting that Dowson is echoing Clough's "reluctant admissions of unbelief", as expressed in "Easter-Day, Naples, 1849". It is more probable, however, that Dowson's doubts about his faith were Paterian in origin.

I shall consider this question in more depth later, but it is interesting to note that Dowson still felt that his allegiance to Newman was primarily a stylistic one, telling Moore that, "I should like to be a sort of combination of Mill & Newman with a little dash of Voltaire".[227] Like Pater in the essay on "Style", Dowson chose Newman and two other models of literary style, a blend of which could never be achieved.

Though they agreed on many points of style, Newman and Pater produced very different literary styles. Pater's endless revisions, as I have shown, often result in a convoluted argument and a loss of vitality, whilst in Newman we find a honing and sharpening which expresses "clearly and exactly" his meaning.

Dowson, in choosing Pater and Newman (as he saw it) as his stylistic forebears, furnished himself with two dissimilar, but also congruent, models and used them in different ways. If Pater is the aesthetic movement's heir to Newman's style, Dowson is certainly his decadent successor with an added religious dimension.

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[227] *Letters* 187.

Chapter 4:

Dowson and the voice

Linda Dowling observes of Pater that his "specifically Decadent portrayal of written language as an artificial and usurping power shapes ... artistic choices as ... [the poets of the fin de siècle] ... struggle to claim Pater's inheritance". As I have already shown, Dowson was acutely aware of Pater's mannered literary style, calling it "an exquisite, artificial, exotic, modern thing".[228] As an example of such prose, *Marius the Epicurean* represented, as Dowling notes, "an outer limit on what English written as a classical language could do".[229] Max Beerbohm, as we have seen, considered that in treating English as a classical language, Pater perceived it as dead, that "he laid out every sentence as a shroud".[230]

Beerbohm's hypothesis leads to a consideration of Victorian decadence as analogous to that of late Rome; subject to decay if viewed in terms of a historical process. In general terms, the concept of a degenerative society, rich in culture but on the verge of collapse, was not a new one, yet in the eighteen-nineties it became the hinge for "an impossible endeavour to 'scientise,' objectify and cast off whole underworlds of political and social anxiety".[231] What differentiates the idea of degeneration in the late nineteenth century is a shift from a general notion of social decline to a specific idea at the centre of medical investigation and scientific thought. Individual bodily degeneration was considered a symptom of the age, of the city, which was seen as a "centre of decay" with its over-population, and of the fact that civilised humanity had simply become exhausted and weak of constitution. As

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228 *Letters* 201.

229 Dowling 176.

230 Max Beerbohm, "Dimuendo," *Writing of the Nineties: From Wilde to Beerbohm*, ed. Derek Stanford (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1971) 48.

231 Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder c.1848-c.1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 10.

Arthur Morrison's *A Child of the Jago* demonstrates, the "criminal type" received a good deal of consideration in the late nineteenth century. Lombroso proposed that there was an identifiable criminal visage, and between 1885 and 1906 he published numerous photographic studies of "criminal faces". As late as 1914, Dowson was being described as of this type. His face [appendix 1]:

> as we see it in the photograph or in the sketch by Mr Rothenstein, with its unclean lips and furtive eyes, has the look with which we are familiar in the degenerate types of our city streets, and from which we turn away with physical revulsion.[232]

Max Nordau's sensationalised treatise on *Degeneration* (1895) was fundamental to the fin de siècle idea of social deterioration. Simplistically subsuming all writers and artists of the period into the criminal fraternity, he "found massive obfuscation and disorders of speech in famous writers and painters".[233] Widely accepted as sensational as well as general in style, Nordau was obsessed by the relation of fin de siècle culture to hysteria. His concept of a corrupt society extended as far as language, which, like society at the fin de siècle, was perceived by some as an organism subject to disease or decay.

So, in distinguishing Pater's sense of English as a dead language from the "cultural collapse" -- perceived or actual -- the two facets of literary decay converge in the widely-accepted idea of a rich culture being near its close. While Edgar Jepson remarked that "it never struck me when I was with those poets that I was in the decadent atmosphere of the later Roman empire",[234] degeneration theory does provide a link between the Victorian fin de siècle and the decline of the Roman

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232 P. E. M. 'Holbrook Jackson's *The Eighteen Nineties*,' *Nation* 98 14 May 1914: 566.
233 Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder c.1848-c.1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 10.
234 Jepson, *Memories* 216.

Empire. Poets like Dowson and Johnson equated contemporary linguistic decay with the supposed decay of late Latin.

Although Dowson's schooling was erratic before he went up to Oxford, he was a competent reader of Latin and had a great sense of what he felt to be the "gross" qualities of the English language when compared with the "fineness" of classical Latin:

> I have just read through the VIth Aeneid; and am intoxicate with its adorable phrases. After all with all our labours of the file and chisel we cannot approach these people in this gross tongue.[235]

He looked to the classical tradition in his work in order to combat something of this perceived "grossness". Explicitly, he uses a plethora of Latin titles ("Vanitas", "Amor Umbratilis", "Sapientia Lunae") which often have the effect, as Mark Baker[236] observes, of putting the reader in a suitable mood for the contemplation of Dowson's recurrent theme of death by their lapidary quality. Moreover, Dowson's titles resist translation into the English language not only because his reading public -- and those who listened at the meetings of the Rhymers' Club -- would have understood their meaning and often their origin, but also because he selected them for their aural quality.

Aware as he was of the "gross" qualities of the English language, Dowson expressed an equal, and incompatible, desire to return to the speaking voice as advocated by his companions at The Cheshire Cheese. The speaking voice to which Dowson was drawn was neither the intimate, simple voice of Newman, nor the Celtic voice of Yeats, nor the expressive Cockney idiom employed by Kipling, whose *Barrack Room Ballads* are probably the best known late nineteenth-century attempt at transcribing the speaking voice.[237]

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235 *Letters* 181.

236 Mark Baker, "Ernest Christopher Dowson 1867-1900," *English* 5 (1945): 155.

237 George Orwell points out both the implausibility of the speech which Kipling employs in these ballads, and the urge to "make fun of a working-man's accent" which spoils many of the best lines.

What then was the speaking voice to which Dowson was drawn? With all caution about art and life comparisons, it seems relevant to recall that Dowson inhabited the social circle of the Café Royal as well that of the East End dock:

> It was in Stepney, a small dock, we lunched in an office that was half office and half sitting room and gritty to the eye and cold, with a dreary December view through the ill-fitting eighteenth century window in to the water of the dock.[238]

Though Dowson was not keen on the family business, Plarr's recollections would support the idea that this was not an aversion from shipping itself, for "despite ... evidence of an amiable interest in shipowners, Ernest Dowson and his father explained that they did not like them ... Ernest Dowson appreciated the trade half-humorously".[239] However, Dowson did write of the "conservative bigotry of the city ship-owner",[240] less as social comment than as resentment at having to do clerical work when he could have been reading or writing verse. Though he mixed with dockers, it seems unlikely that he adopted any of their speech-patterns. It appears that his own voice influenced that of another, since Jepson recalls that Adelaide's "long acquaintance with Dowson had polished her, for there was little trace of the Cockney accent in her speech".[241]

It is widely remembered among the members of the Rhymers' Club that Dowson, whose voice Plarr described as "low and somewhat broken",[242] disliked reading his own verse[243] and usually prevailed upon Lionel Johnson to read for him:

"'Follow me 'ome' is much uglier than 'follow me home.'" George Orwell, *Critical Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954) 119. Orwell argues that by employing a "stylised Cockney", Kipling displays a lack of awareness of the linguistic forces at work in the language of the working class, though it would be impossible to transcribe Cockney speech effectively and Orwell's attitude is an aesthetic, rather than a linguistic one.

238 Jepson, *Memories* 217.

239 Victor Plarr, *Ernest Dowson: Reminiscences, Unpublished Letters and Marginalia* (New York: L. J. Gomme, 1914) 34.

240 *Letters* 158. He also wrote to Moore in July 1889 that "I do little except curse my fate & everything connected with shipping" *Letters* 93.

241 Jepson, *Memories* 220.

242 Victor Plarr, *Ernest Dowson: Reminiscences, Unpublished Letters and Marginalia* (New York: L. J. Gomme, 1914) 66.

> He refused ever to recite his verses at the Rhymers' meetings, declaring that he had no gift that way. He shuddered at that kind of publicity and left the task to others -- to Lionel Johnson ... who read marvellously ... or to Mr W. B. Yeats, whose half-chant is incomparable.[244]

Sherard too recalls Dowson's reticence about reading his own verse:

> Would that I could hear such lines in the poet's own voice but Ernest Dowson never on any occasion, except perhaps at the Rhymers' Club, could be induced even to speak of his verse. I remember once begging him to speak for me the lines beginning "They are not long the days of love and laughter [*sic*]" and so noting his shy reluctance to comply with my request that I never asked him again.[245]

Perhaps he was wary of sounding like Yeats, whom Jepson describes as "delivering his poems in a harsh and high and chanting voice".[246] But Dowson was naturally reserved and:

> talked little: he would eat his dinner in a dreamy, childlike content, and now and then throw in a word, but more often a smile ... Yet sometimes ... his face would twist into an astonishing malignity, and he would snarl out really blasting objurgations.[247]

Personal idiosyncrasies aside, there appear to be, as Dowling suggests, competing allegiances in the language of Dowson's poetry towards ordinary spoken language and the high literary mode. By exercising a self-curtailment and frugality of expression, he largely limits his vocabulary to a few key words, which results in repetition of words, phrases and, indeed, subjects:

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243 Eric Griffiths, in *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 106, notes Tennyson's paradoxical striving after a form of musical annotation to indicate how the poem should be read, whilst refusing to allow anyone else to read his poetry owing to a belief in the superiority of his own speaking voice.

244 Victor Plarr, *Ernest Dowson: Reminiscences, Unpublished Letters and Marginalia* (New York: L. J. Gomme, 1914) 66.

245 Robert Harborough Sherard, foreword, Laurence Dakin, *Ernest Dowson*, MS 1047/ 4 / 62. University of Reading archives, 2.

246 Jepson 235. The recordings of Yeats's voice between 1932 and 1937 suggest that he may not have been the best person to read his work!

247 Jepson 258.

> He tempers the richness of the high literary tradition with the impoverished but authentic sordor of literary naturalism ... But plainly, these are the shifts of a poet reduced to a handful of poetic alternatives as he attempts to preserve out of the written tradition something rich, yet sayable for the speaking voice.[248]

Dowling's comment seems to suggest that Dowson valued the spoken over the written tradition, for she goes on to argue that Dowson's poetry exhibits a weakening rationale for specifically "written" language. It is probably truer to say, however, that he was torn between the two. Between these two poles fall several intermediate states which also influence Dowson's language. Though he was fond of Paterian literary language and the speaking voice, Dowson was also drawn to the condition of silence, to "heard" verse and acoustics and, in part, to song.

Eric Griffiths[249] highlights Tennyson's anxiety about the surface of language and his concern that the poet may be placing unwarranted trust in words which have become mere shells of meaning, though retaining illusory depths. I would suggest that Dowson's concern with linguistic surface stems from similar misgivings about the ability of words to express meaning, and that, as a result, he deliberately limits his vocabulary. We can see this as a form of damage limitation as well as an investment in the few words which he felt to be successful in conveying the desired expression.

As well as limiting his vocabulary in accordance with Pater's dictates, Dowson was much preoccupied with sound, calling Virgil the "master of melancholy sound".[250] Acoustics played an important part in contemporary perceptions of linguistic changes. The "Cynara poem", with its metrical virtuosity, demands to be read for the simple reason that the rhythm cannot be discerned from the printed page:

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248 Dowling 211.
249 Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1989).
250 *Letters* 146.

All night upon my heart I felt her warm heart beat,
Night long within mine arms in love and sleep she lay;
Surely the kisses of her bought red mouth were sweet;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
When I awoke and found the dawn was gray:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

However, it is also visually rewarding with its refrains, and for its chiasmus ("All night" "Night-long"), and for the juxtaposition of "heart" and "beat". Dowson was particularly susceptible to what was aurally pleasant, and his conception of heard verse muddies the water further as it fits neither with the spoken tradition nor the written. It is also interesting to observe that Dowson does not often use poetic forms linked with the oral tradition, such as the ballad form, though he does favour the refrain.[251]

He wrote to Moore that "Children's voices in concert are wonderful. Children's voices exercised in the 'Ave Maris Stella' are the most beautiful things in the world".[252] An experience at the church of Notre Dame de France, a French Roman Catholic church off Leicester Square, evidently inspired "Benedictio Domini":

> There was a procession after Vespers of the Enfants de Marie & I just managed to discern my special Enfant in spite of her veil ... It was a wonderful & beautiful situation: the church -- rather dark the smell of incense -- the long line of graceful little girls ... a few sad faced nuns -- and last of the priest carrying the Host, vested in white -- censed by an acolyte who walked backwards -- tossing his censer up "like a great gilt flower": and to come outside afterwards -- London again -- the sullen streets and the sordid people & Leicester Square![253]

Though he sums up the incident as "most pictorial",[254] the resulting poem explores his perception of the offensive sounds of London when compared with the noiseless church:

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251 Though the refrain is not exclusively connected with the oral tradition, (it may, for example, simply re-establish the atmosphere of the poem at the end of a stanza), it is often found in oral forms such as the ballad.
252 *Letters* 173.
253 *Letters* 172.
254 *Letters* 172.

Without, the sullen noises of the street!
The voice of London, inarticulate,
Hoarse and blaspheming, surges in to meet
The silent blessing of the Immaculate.

Dark is the church, and dim the worshippers,
Hushed with bowed heads as though by some old spell,
While through the incense-laden air there stirs
The admonition of a silver bell.

Dark is the church, save where the altar stands,
Dressed like a bride, illustrious with light,
Where one old priest exalts with tremulous hands
The one true solace of man's fallen plight.

Strange silence here: without, the sounding street
Heralds the world's swift passage to the fire:
O Benediction, perfect and complete!
When shall men cease to suffer and desire?

It is particularly striking that the "voice of London" is also "inarticulate", producing only "sullen noises". The "voice of London", is implicitly resentful and dismal, as well as "hoarse and blaspheming". In its violence it "surges in", blaspheming, to "meet" -- a term which has the effect of relaxing the "surging" -- the "silent blessing of the Immaculate".

It is interesting to compare Dowson's thoughts on London with Blake's "London", though it must be borne in mind that the poems are very different in outlook and intention. Only Blake can properly hear the "mind-forg'd manacles" in "every cry", because only he, as a poet, is aware of the ills, and their causes, peculiar to large cities like London. For Blake, reason has created social constrictions and repressive institutions, such as the church, which impose the limitations which in turn cause prostitution. The conventional sounds of the city are penetrated by both poets, since the evils of the city are not only visible but audible too. "How the Chimney-sweepers cry / Every blackning Church appalls", because the Church is in part responsible for the repression it condemns. By contrast, in Dowson's London the church is invoked as a place of respite, opposing all that the metropolis stands

for. It is defined not in terms of utterances, but lack of them. There is a strong sense of a linguistic dichotomy in a city that is outwardly so offensive, but holds such sites of absolute repose where all is silence. A similar idea is explored in "Villanelle of Acheron", where the poet can reside "By the pale marge of Acheron", where:

> No busy voices there shall stun
> Our ears: the stream flows silently
> By the pale marge of Acheron.

Acheron is the river in the underworld which breaks through the impenetrable gorge into the Acherusion plain. In this poem, Dowson evokes a secular scene which provides relief from "the stress of earth and sea", and it is worth noting that the evocation of the dead in the *Odyssey* draws upon the Acherusian plain. Dowson's relief, then, suggests explicitly the repose of death.

In "Benedictio Domini", the worshippers are at a remove from the language of "the coster and cadger" in the church and are "hushed with bowed heads". Indeed, the poem works to counter the language of the street by setting the church up as a place of respite where all that can be heard is the "admonition of a silver bell". The opening and closing stanzas act as buffers to the outside world as they contain the grammatically-symmetrical internal stanzas. The repetition of "dark is the church" is almost an incantation, and it evokes the "incense-laden air". These two stanzas provide the continuity and sanctity which the poet finds at the altar and which he equates here, as elsewhere, with silence. The poem also demonstrates Dowson's awareness of etymology, ("The altar ...illustrious with light"), and his economy of words. Yet in his economy we find a repetition of the "l" sound and as well as the idea of light; a repetition which verges on redundancy. In "Benedictio Domini", he is thus drawn towards the condition of silence, or perhaps the non-linguistic sound of the "silver bell", even as he articulates his conception of language.

The question of whether Dowson was drawn to high literary language or to the vernacular is confused even further by his recurrent motif of silence -- expressed, of course, through language. Almost without exception, Dowson's silence is linked with speech or speaking, whether it be a "speaking silence" or an urging of a respite from speech. In "Terre Promise", a "speaking silence", as Dowling[255] observes, privileges gesture over words:

> Even now the fragrant darkness of her hair
> Had brushed my cheek; and once, in passing by,
> Her hand upon my hand lay tranquilly:
> What things unspoken trembled in the air!
>
> Always I know, how little severs me
> From mine heart's country, that is yet so far;
> And must I lean and long across a bar,
> That half a word would shatter utterly?
>
> Ah might it be, that just by touch of hand,
> Or speaking silence, shall the barrier fall;
> And she shall pass, with no vain words at all,
> But droop into mine arms, and understand!

Here, the silence which the poet desires is not simply a state of soundlessness, but a silence pregnant with meaning. It is the poet's incapacity to utter the "half a word" which is the major cause of his distress. Though he is aware that the barrier between himself and the object is of his desire could be easily removed, "things unspoken" still linger in the air. The silence itself is meaningful, though not meaningful enough. The ideal state, therefore, would be one in which an understanding could be reached between the couple "with no vain words at all". As it is, "things unspoken" hover in the air, but they still need to be spoken.

The inability to speak is a recurrent motif in Dowson's work. I would suggest that Dowson is expressing his misgivings about the ability of words to express not only the intended meaning, but to convey *any* meaning in a given circumstance. The

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[255] Dowling 209.

second stanza of "Terre Promise" is, in fact, more ambiguous than it might at first appear. If we again examine the final two lines, "And must I lean and long across a bar, / That half a word would shatter utterly?" it seems that if he could only speak the words, the obstacle would be removed. The use of the word "utterly" further reinforces the poet's *angst* with regard to speech or utterance. Between the poet and his mistress exists a "bar"[256] which "half a word" would "shatter utterly", but to what effect? If he articulates this "half a word" the barrier may indeed fall, but it may sever them completely. At least while it is in place they are connected in some degree on opposite sides of the bar and the poet is able to "lean and long" across it. Speaking the "half a word" may unite them or divide them further. The unspoken significance of a silence, then, is the preferred state when the efficacy of words is called into question.

"A Valediction" expresses a similar desire to "let silence speak":

> If we must part,
> Then let it be like this;
> Not heart on heart,
> Nor with the useless anguish of a kiss;
> But touch mine hand and say:
> *"Until to-morrow or some other day,*
> *If we must part."*
>
> Words are so weak
> When love hath been so strong:
> Let silence speak:
> *"Life is a little while, and love is long;*
> *A time to sow and reap,*
> *And after harvest a long time to sleep,*
> *But words are weak."*

In the first verse the poet's allegiance seems to lie with speech rather than with a gesture such as a kiss. It is not clear, however, whether he wishes to hear the concluding words of the stanza actually spoken to reassure himself that their re-union

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[256] This is rather a Rossettian "bar" than a Tennysonian bar as in "The Blessed Damozel", "Until her bosom must have made / The bar she leaned on warm".

is certain in this life or after death. Indeed, we can read the fifth line as an incitement for her simply to touch his hand for the action itself to express the final sentiment. The second stanza would support this reading, both in the italicised sections of the verse form and because Dowson is again affirming his belief that "words are so weak". It is interesting that he is able to utter -- or, more accurately, commit to paper -- the words that he wishes the silence to speak. Though he acknowledges the weakness of words, as a poet he is unable to renounce them completely. The final four lines can be seen, then, as an attempt to crystallise his own ideas about life, love, communication, and temporality. Moreover, as I have observed before, Dowson is paradoxically generating words in his plea for silence.

This is also the case in "O Mors! Quam Amara est Memoria Tua Homini Pacem Habenti in Substantiis Suis" which so impressed Yeats at the meetings of the Rhymers' Club. As in "A Valediction", Dowson's appeal for quiet has the opposite effect of producing sound:

Exceeding sorrow
        Consumeth my sad heart!
Because to-morrow
        We must depart,
Now is exceeding sorrow
        All my part!

Give over playing,
        Cast thy viol away:
Merely laying
        Thine head my way:
Prithee, give over playing,
        Grave or gay.

Be no word spoken;
        Weep nothing: let a pale
Silence, unbroken
        Silence prevail!
Prithee, be no word spoken,
        Lest I fail!

Forget to-morrow!
        Weep nothing: only lay
In silent sorrow
        Thine head my way:
Let us forget to-morrow,
        This one day!

Yeats wrote of this poem in his *Autobiographies* that, "for long I only knew Dowson's *O Mors,* to quote but the first words of its long title, and his Villanelle of Sunset from his reading, and it was because of the desire to hold them in my hands that I suggested the first Book of the Rhymers' Club".[257] What Yeats is describing, therefore, is the fin de siècle linguistic minefield, since he desires poems which he knows only from recitals to be transcribed into something tactile. He was later to describe Dowson's poems as "songs for the speaking voice".[258] Each form, then, is inextricably bound up with the other.

Like "A Valediction", "O Mors!" is a poem of departure, in which the poet would rather suffer a "silent sorrow" than listen to "viols", weeping, or speech. In the third stanza, repetition, and exclamation marks heighten the effect of urgency in the speaker's request for calm. The middle two stanzas of the rondeau are the most interesting because the longing for a "Silence, unbroken" is made all the more poignant by break in the rhythm effected by a comma after the word "silence". It also reflects his fear of a broken utterance and his insistence upon quiet rather than speech "Lest I fail!" -- meaning, again, the failure of his own voice. Dowling writes of this poem that the lines "do not simply praise silence, they enact its blessing",[259] and indeed we can see that the language both states *and* performs in Dowson's plea for "Silence, unbroken / Silence prevail!"

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257 W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* 371.

258 It is certainly true, as Northrop Frye observes, that for centuries "poets refused to admit that their expression was verbal: they insisted that it was song, or even instrumental music". "Approaching the Lyric," *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, eds. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (London: Cornell University Presss, 1985) 31-7. This is, perhaps, because the term "lyric" implies a musical instrument.

The final poem which demands consideration with regard to Dowson's attitude towards silence is "Beata Solitudo":

What land of Silence,
Where pale stars shine
On apple blossom
And dew-drenched vine,
Is yours and mine?

The silent valley
That we will find,
Where all the voices
Of humankind
Are left behind.

There all forgetting,
Forgotten quite,
We will repose us,
With our delight
Hid out of sight.

The world forsaken,
And out of mind
Honour and labour,
We shall not find
The stars unkind.

And men shall travail,
And laugh and weep;
But we have vistas
Of gods asleep,
With dreams as deep.

A land of Silence,
Where pale stars shine
On apple blossoms
And dew-drenched vine,
Be yours and mine!

Curiously, the mood of this poem is one of optimism and tranquillity. The "silent valley" is a real possibility in this poem, not just a hoped-for idyll. The poet and his companion can be content in a land where they are free from the weeping and the laughter of "all the voices of humankind". This "land of silence", however, could

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[259] Dowling 220.

quite clearly be the netherworld of death. A deathly silence or otherwise, in all the poems cited it seems preferable to "busy voices" which "stun / our ears" ("Villanelle of Acheron"). As I have suggested, Dowson's preoccupation with silence as an alternative to speech and to "the sullen noises" of the city indicates his scepticism about the validity of a shared language.

The short story "The Diary of a Successful Man" admirably demonstrates Dowson's awareness of linguistic pressures. The narrative events are structured to show how all the conditions of language are interwoven. Speech -- or song -- opposes silence, and in turn the silence of the written opposes the spoken. Every condition is given equal consideration in the story, adding to the atmosphere and facilitating the action. Dowson, in making the tension between these states the structuring principle of the story, conveys his uncertainty about the ability of language to express meaning in *any* form.

Dion, the protagonist, returns to Bruges after twenty years, having spent his working life as a lawyer in India. As the title suggests, the narrative is in the form of a diary, and the first entry ends with the observation that, "Ah, it is a mistake to keep a journal -- a mistake."[260] In his youth Dion had lived in Bruges and, with his friend Lorimer, had found favour with Delphine, Comtesse de Savaresse. However, the widowed Comtesse had finally made a choice between the two friends. Dion left Bruges in despair, hearing nothing from Lorimer or Delphine again. This in itself perplexes him:

> [Lorimer] cannot be dead. I am told that he had pictures in this last Academy -- yet, never to have written -- never once, through all these years. I suppose there are few friendships which can stand the test of correspondence ... Was their marriage happy I wonder? ... It is strange, though, that I never heard of it, that he never wrote to me once, not through all those years.[261]

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[260] *Stories* 36.

[261] *Stories* 37.

Though Lorimer continues his painting, he is either incapable of writing to Dion or unwilling to do so. Early in the story, therefore, Dowson presents expression in one form, painting, in opposition to that in another, writing. In addition, the often-used idea of "hearing" from someone via a letter confuses the modes of speech and writing from the first. It also establishes a background for the mistake which has occurred from precisely such confusion.

Dion, as his diary records, has a good memory for speech and is alert to voices and their modulation. He remembers Delphine in her youth as having a "soft, low voice, which was none the less sweet for its modulation of sadness", and an ability to sing "divinely".[262] Lorimer too is described as having a "melodious voice", though when Dion meets him again after twenty years, "it was pitched in the singularly low key which I have noticed some foreign priests acquire who live much in churches".[263] Indeed, Dion's reunion with Lorimer occurs in the church of Saint Sauveur's, though not in a silent church but in one that is filled with the "O Salutaris" sung by "those buried women behind the screen".[264] Though the reason has not yet been divulged, Dion makes a point of observing that:

> it is astonishing how his face has changed, what an extraordinary restlessness his speech and eye have acquired.

Lorimer's undisclosed sorrow almost results in an inability to speak, so it is fitting that Dion should discover his friend in a church, a place of silence or of "invisible" music. Lorimer is neither married to Delphine, Dion concludes, nor able to explain the mystery to him:

> I cannot help thinking that he possesses the key to all that has so puzzled me, and that to-night he will endeavour to speak.[265]

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262 *Stories* 40.
263 *Stories* 43.
264 *Stories* 42.
265 *Stories* 44.

Paralleling Dion's recollection of the voices of his friends is the memory of the last correspondence with Delphine, a "poor yellow letter with ... faded ink which wrote "Finis" to my youth and made a man of me".[266] In establishing the similarity between the memories, Dowson sets up the dichotomy between the positive impressions of the spoken and the sung and the negative image of the written.

With Dion's return to Bruges comes Lorimer's disclosure of the reason he and Delphine never married. In her haste to convey her messages to the two young men, Delphine confused the envelopes, inadvertently summoning the man she had meant to dismiss and dismissing the one she had chosen. Upon Lorimer's arrival at Delphine's house, the mistake was discovered:

> Poor Lorimer! I have hardly yet got over the shock which his visit last night caused me, and the amazement with which I heard and read between the lines of his strange confession.[267]

Though the plot-device is not only familiar but clichéd, the mix-up of the letters has a definite function in Dowson's story. It is interesting that Dowson now reverses the image of "hearing" something written, to "reading" an oral confession. Thus the confusion which has occurred becomes explicit through Dowson's use of metaphor. That which could have been spoken in Delphine's "soft, low voice" was instead written, and in the transcription and envoy it became confused, fundamentally altering the lives of all three characters. Something written caused great sorrow and distress, though "a single word would have rectified [it]".[268]

However, this single word was never uttered by Lorimer. Since Dion had left for London, Lorimer followed, but prevaricated so much about telling his friend that it was finally too late: Dion had sailed to India to pursue his career as a lawyer. Lorimer then returned to Bruges where, Dion speculates, Delphine "must have said

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[266] *Stories* 41.

things to him in her beautiful quiet voice which he has never forgotten".[269] After an announcement of Dion's subsequent marriage in *The Times*, "it seemed to him that he could only be silent".[270]

The mistake caused by the written could have been remedied by the spoken -- the "single word" -- yet silence prevails over the spoken again and perpetuates the mistake. In his prose, as in his poetry, Dowson is ambivalent towards the written and the spoken. His allegiance in "The Diary of a Successful Man" is ostensibly to the spoken -- to pleasant voices, beautiful song, and the spontaneity, as well as transience, which could have corrected the misunderstanding -- rather than to the written form. Delphine's letter, in its petrified written form, not only caused the confusion -- which would, of course, have been averted had she addressed the two men orally -- but changed the course of all their lives, and it stands as a reminder to Dion of his lost chance. It has, therefore, inscribed not only the wrong message, but also their lives. For Dion, the letter conveyed not only Delphine's message of rejection but "wrote "Finis" to my youth and made a man of me".[271] To Lorimer, it spelled initial elation and then profound distress at the discovery of the mistake. Moreover, it revealed his weakness of character when he could not bring himself to facilitate the happiness of Dion and Delphine.

But speech is also flawed in the story. Lorimer's inability either to speak or to write of the mistake compounds not only his own misery but also that of Dion and Delphine. Dion also surmises that Delphine's words to Lorimer as a result of his "baseness" have done him great harm. Yet silence, in this instance, is not a viable alternative, though it may be in a poem such as "A Valediction".

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[267] *Stories* 44.
[268] *Stories* 44.
[269] *Stories* 45.
[270] *Stories* 46.
[271] *Stories* 41.

After the revelation of the perpetuated misunderstanding, "the air was full of unspoken words" between the two men. Up to this point in the story Delphine has only existed as represented by Dion. As he found Lorimer, he must find Delphine: in the church:

> as the jubilant organ burst out ... [Lorimer] seemed to be listening in a very passion of attention. But as the incense began to fill the air, and the Litany of Loreto smote on my ear to some sorrowful, undulating Gregorian ... I forgot the miserable mistake ... and I was once more back in the past -- with Delphine -- kneeling by her side. Strophe by strophe that perfect litany rose and was lost in a cloud of incense, in the mazy arches of the roof.[272]

The importance of song as a setting for both past and present is great, for it accompanies Dion's re-discovery of the two people who meant much to him in his youth:

> Instrophe and antistrophe: the melancholy, nasal intonation of the priest died away, and the exquisite women's voices in the gallery took it up with exultation, and yet with something like a sob -- a sob of limitation ... [it continued] through all the exquisite changes of the hymn, until the time of the music changed, and the priest intoned the closing line.[273]

The final revelation that Delphine has renounced worldliness, along with the man she loved, by becoming one of the Dames Rouges comes as little surprise to those familiar with Dowson's formula of renunciation. Delphine has:

> the one voice which rose above all the others, a voice of marvellous sweetness and power, which from the first moment had caused [Dion] a curious thrill.[274]

Joining the order of the Dames Rouges means that Delphine can never be seen again; she must always be one of "those buried women behind the screen".[275] Lorimer, as his speech discloses, now spends most of his time in the church to be near Delphine,

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272 *Stories* 47.
273 *Stories* 48.
274 *Stories* 48.

though her voice is his only access to her. Delphine, through her mistake, has probably been driven to the church as a result of the loss of her happiness and the grief she inflicted upon both Lorimer and Dion. In his first encounter with the hidden nuns, Dion perceives them as "buried", as indeed Delphine is to him, but she is "buried" most specifically to Lorimer for it is Dion who was her choice. This sentiment accords with Dowson's remark in "Countess Marie of the Angels" that, "there are some renunciations which are better than happiness".[276] Though Delphine's renunciation through the church is not presented as "better" than happiness, it is shown to be a real, and indeed an aesthetic, alternative in which Delphine can atone for the misery caused by her confusion of the letters. Without speech and without the written, Delphine lives in an alternative world of silence and song.

In Dowling's view the spoken -- or indeed the sung -- model for most of the nineties poets is not Newman but Swinburne. She suggests that Swinburne associated the "language of the book" with the Bible, which for him represented repressive authority. But, as Desmond Flower has pointed out in his introduction to *The Poetical Works of Ernest Dowson*:

> Swinburne's legacy to Dowson was one of tone rather than of metre: none of the metres that are so characteristic of Swinburne ... [is] to be found in the latter's pages ... although there are similarities between Swinburne and Dowson ... their outlook and approach in anything more than single lines and occasional stanzas is quite different.[277]

There are certainly some verbal parallels between Swinburne and Dowson -- unsurprising given Dowson's fondness for *Poems and Ballads* at Oxford and

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[275] *Stories* 42.

[276] *Stories* 136.

[277] Desmond Flower, introduction, *The Poetical Works of Ernest Dowson* (London: Cassell and Co., 1934) 22.

afterwards -- the most notable being the first two stanzas of "The Garden of Proserpine", which has many similarities with Dowson's poetry:

> Here, where the world is quiet;
> Here, where all trouble seems
> Dead winds' and spent waves' riot
> In doubtful dreams of dreams;
> I watch the green field growing
> For reaping folk and sowing,
> For harvest time and mowing,
> A sleepy world of streams.
>
> I am tired of tears and laughter,
> And men that laugh and weep;
> Of what may come hereafter
> For men that sow to reap:
> I am weary of days and hours,
> Blown buds of barren flowers,
> Desires and dreams and powers
> And everything but sleep.

The first has similarities with "Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam", ("the weeping and the laughter") and with "Villanelle of Acheron", ("the stream flows silently / By the pale marge of Acheron"). The second stanza has an obvious parallel in both Dowson's poems entitled "Spleen," ("I was not sorrowful, but only tired / Of everything that ever I desired").

It is here that such similarities end. As Flower observes, the approach of the two poets is very different. If we again consider "The Garden of Proserpine", it is clear that where stanza two alone would have sufficed for Dowson, Swinburne continues to explore his idea for a further ten verses. Dowson's brevity has nothing in common with Swinburne's excess.[278] Though the language of the poems is often very similar,

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[278] If we compare briefly Swinburne's "Hymn to Proserpine" with Dowson's " A Coronal", we get an idea of Swinburnean excess and Dowsonian brevity:

> I have lived long enough, having seen one thing, that love hath an end;
> Goddess and maiden and queen, be near me now and befriend.
> Thou art more than the day or the morrow, the seasons that laugh or that weep;
> For these give joy and sorrow; but thou, Proserpina, sleep.
> Violets and leaves of vine,
> For Love when poor Love dies

with references to "cold immortal hands" and "languid lips", in Dowson we find an economy which, Dowling suggests, verges on "emotional autism".[279]

Such verbal resemblances combined with a likeness of tone are, then, the sum of Dowson's debt to Swinburne. Though, as his Oxford friend remembers, Dowson had heavily scored "Hertha" and "Dolores" in his copy of *Poems and Ballads*, Swinburne's influence upon Dowson did not manifest itself in pastiche:

> it is worth pointing out that Dowson is distinguished from the greater poet by his softness of tone: he had no great fondness for alliteration (except for the letter 'v' in Poe's 'viol,' 'violet' and 'vine'), nor did strong music appeal to him in verse.[280]

But, as I have shown, "sound" itself was important to Dowson in his poetry. He wrote to Plarr of "Vanitas" that:

> its an attempt at mere sound verse, with scarcely the shadow of sense in it: or hardly that so much as vague, Verlainesque emotion. Its an inferior production.[*sic*][281]

"Vanitas" is not one of Dowson's best poems, but clearly it cannot be simply "sound verse" for it also carries meaning:

> The crown and victor's token:
> How are they worth to-day?
> The one word left unspoken,
> It were late now to say:
> But cast the palm away!

> We gather and entwine
> This wreath that lives a day
> Over his pale, cold eyes,
> Kissed shut by Proserpine,
> At set of sun we lay:
> Violets and leaves of vine
> We gather and entwine.

279 Dowling 207. It is important that we do not confuse what Yeats identified as a "simplicity" with Dowling's idea of "emotional autism". As Yeats observed, Francis Thompson's "preoccup[ation] with his elaborate verse" may have caused him to consider "what seemed to [the Rhymers] simplicity, mere emptiness". W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* 302.

280 W. R. Thomas, "Ernest Dowson at Oxford," *The Nineteenth Century and After* (1928): 561.

281 *Letters* 189.

With its shift of rhythm in the penultimate line, it emphasises the emotion as the persona realises that "It were late now to say" the "one word". It is not an "inferior" work, as Dowson puts it, but it is curious that he should consider "Vanitas" "mere sound verse" when poems such as "O Mors!" and "Villanelle of Sunset", ("Behold the weary West!") are far more deserving of that description.

The theme of music, however, appealed to him in prose, though it is not always portrayed in a positive light. Most of the stories incorporate some reference to music and two are wholly based around musicians. In Dowson's short stories, musicians are presented as supreme artists. "Souvenirs of an Egoist" and "An Orchestral Violin" make the idea of musicianship as the summit of artistic achievement pivotal. In "Souvenirs of an Egoist", Anton -- the narrator and a world-renowned composer and performer -- recalls his life as a street-urchin with his friend Ninette. He is rescued from his life on the streets by his musical talent, and his resulting egoism[282] leads him to care for his fiddle more than for human relationships. The children had scraped a living on the streets of Paris, she by grinding her barrel-organ, he by playing his fiddle, which he loved "passionately". From the outset, Anton holds Ninette in very low esteem and values his own talent "above a mere organ-grinder". However, the narrative suggests that Ninette has almost certainly saved Anton from starvation and Anton himself concedes that, "I never cared for anyone except my fiddle, until I knew Ninette".

In the scheme that Dowson presents, his as yet undiscovered musical talent and his fiddle take precedence in Anton's life. But for a short time Ninette occupies a place just behind the fiddle in his esteem. When his old fiddle becomes rain damaged and useless, he suffers greatly because:

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[282] I am using the term "egoism", as Dowson does, to denote a particular philosophical belief on the part of the individual that there is nothing beyond the individual mind. Self-interest, in this case, is

> It could talk to me, Ninette, and tell me beautiful, new things, always beautiful and always new. Oh, Ninette, I shall die if I cannot play.[283]

Ninette is clearly excluded from Anton's rapport with his fiddle, more so when by a piece of good fortune the children have enough money to buy a new violin. Anton persuades Ninette to sacrifice the purchase of several items of new clothing in order to buy the new instrument:

> perhaps she knew instinctively that music was with me a single and absorbing passion, from which she was excluded.[284]

Ninette, observes Anton, had no feeling for her barrel-organ:

> she felt not the smallest tendresse for it, and could not understand why a dead and inanimate fiddle, made of mere wood and catgut, should be any more to me than that. How could she know that to me it was never a dead thing ... before ever it had given out wild impassioned music beneath my hands, it was always a live thing to me, alive and with a human, throbbing heart, vibrating with hope and passion.[285]

With Jamesian predictability, it is the violin which Ninette agrees to buy that facilitates Anton's rise from street-urchin to impresario. Playing on the street for money, Anton is overheard by Lady Greville and her nephew, who offer to take him in, care for him, and educate him. At first, Anton refuses to go with them unless Ninette can accompany him. But when offered a Stradivarius for himself he agrees to live with them and agrees that Ninette should be placed with nuns. The recognition of his own selfishness is evident -- selfishness which is a by-product of his musical gift. Having been given unlimited access to a fine violin and free rein to his talent, Anton scarcely ever thinks of Ninette again, save for a moment of sorrow when he learns that she has run away from the convent. Nothing, he remarks,

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the foundation of morality. Dowson chooses this term over "egotism" which implies a more limited sense of a too frequent use of first-person singular.

283 *Stories* 21.

284 *Stories* 24.

disturbs "the serene repose of my egoism". Even to Lady Greville her protégé is not likeable but "merely the complement of her famous fiddle".[286]

"An Orchestral Violin" also explores egoism as a result of musical talent. Maurice Cristich, a violinist and former composer in Vienna, makes the acquaintance of the narrator, and gradually his story is divulged. Cristich makes his living in London by sporadic teaching and by playing at the Opera. One night, he invites the narrator to hear Madame Romanoff sing in *Fidelio*. It is then that he tells the story of taking in a little girl upon the death of her father, his neighbour. "Child as she was, she had already the promise of her magnificent voice", so he sent her to the Conservatoire in Milan. The little girl whom Cristich taught to sing and to play the violin became the celebrated Madame Romanoff.

At La Scala she met a baritone, Romanoff, whom she married despite Cristich's opposition. He does not hear from her again, save for this single occasion when he is part of the orchestra, "How badly I played! execrably!" Madame Romanoff's rejection of Cristich results in a diminution of his own talent. Dowson suggests that she has leached much of his talent and inspiration from him with her own "artful music".

Towards the middle of the story, Maurice Cristich dies of pneumonia and bequeathes his effects to the unnamed narrator. Among these is Cristich's violin of "seasoned melodious wood" which he desires to be conveyed to Madame Romanoff. She receives the narrator coldly, believing herself to have been misrepresented, causing both Cristich and the narrator to think ill of her. She concludes her interview with the emissary by remarking, "I have to sing presently, with such a voice as our talk has left me".[287] Distress is shown to affect her musical performance and is,

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285 *Stories* 24-5.
286 *Stories* 31.
287 *Stories* 68.

therefore, something to be avoided. Egoism and indifference to others, however, result in:

> "passionate sympathy" of my playing, the "enormous potentiality of suffering" revealed in my music[288]

for the Baron Antonelli.

Music and musical talent, in Dowson's scheme of things, produce egoism which is only slightly touched by the suffering of those who have facilitated the growth of that talent. It is interesting that the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites an excerpt from the *Saturday Review* 15 November 1879 as its definition of the word "egoist":

> He is thoroughly selfish, an 'egoist,' as Mr Meredith, adopting current slang, writes the word which used to be 'egotist.'

Dowson's use of the word "egoist" as opposed to "egotist" indicates not only his preference for the French version of the word but also his debt to George Meredith. Additionally, his short story "The Eyes of Pride" takes its title from Meredith's *Modern Love.*

In her discussion of Dowson's attitude towards silence, Dowling concludes that he is exploring the "superiority of gesture over words" -- indeed we may say of Dowson's poetry that gestures such as "touch of hand" function as forms of language. According to Dowling, Dowson looks back to Meredith "who explored the inadequacy of language in prose".[289] This is a primary concern in *One of Our Conquerors,* (1891), where the failure of communication results in failed marriages, strained familial bonds, and even death. "Beyond language lies silence, music and death. Each of these in turn dominates the novel".[290] The failure of Victor, the

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[288] *Stories* 32.

[289] Dowling 209.

[290] Gillian Beer, "*One of Our Conquerors:* Language and Music," *Meredith Now: Some Critical Essays* ed. Ian Fletcher (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1971) 266.

central character, to make language work for him is shown in his inability to respond to his daughter:

> Remonstrance, argument ... swelled to his lips and sunk in dumbness ... He tried to think she ought not to be so wise of the things of the world. An effort to imagine a reproof, showed him her spirit through her eyes: in her deeds too ... Victor could no longer so naturally name her Fredi.[291]

Meredith's solution to the perceived failure of language is found in music, as Gillian Beer observes:

> Music was necessary to the world of Meredith's novels from the start of his career. He struggled to render the full complexity of experience into words, he worried at language, forcing upon grammar and syntax a heightened dramatic role.[292]

Beer's comment suggests that for Meredith language proved inadequate to express "the full complexity of experience" and, like Pater, he considered that music was the best vehicle (or at least a complementary one) for rendering experience. His characters in *One of Our Conquerors* find a harmony in music which relieves them of a destructive silence:

> Under the charm of Nataly's rich contralto during a duet with Priscilla Graves, she gesticulated ecstasies, and uttered them, and genuinely; and still, when reduced to meditations, they would have had no weight, they would hardly have seemed an apology for language, beside Victor's gaze of pleasure in the noble forthroll of the notes.[293]

Music is, therefore, presented as a liberating force from the restrictions of language in Meredith's novels, and it operates without the egoism which results, in Dowson's stories, from supreme artistry.

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291 George Meredith, *One of Our Conquerors* (1891; London: Constable and Co. Ltd., 1919) 482.
292 Gillian Beer, "*One of Our Conquerors:* Language and Music," *Meredith Now: Some Critical Essays* ed. Ian Fletcher (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1971) 266.
293 George Meredith, *One of Our Conquerors* (1891; London: Constable and Co. Ltd., 1919) 80.

However, an affinity for music as an alternative to speech is not Dowson's only link with Meredith. In the late eighteen-eighties, when he was collaborating with Moore on their novels, Dowson expressed a wish to imitate Meredith's prose style, "Oh what would I not give to discover his secret -- inimitable -- inimitable method!"[294] During the summer of 1889 Dowson was reading Meredith voraciously, and his letters are full of praise for the "uniformly good style" and "human"[295] characters. It is an enthusiasm, however, which does not last into the eighteen-nineties. Nevertheless, we can detect the influence of Meredith in some of Dowson's short stories. He wrote to Moore, "Do you remember the episode of Mdlle Niniche in 'The American?'"[296] which Desmond Flower footnotes as a slip for Noémie Nioche in Meredith's novel. Noémie, a young French woman, is a professional artist who makes her living by copying great paintings and is the cause of a duel in which her suitor dies. However, Valentin, her suitor, facilitates the marriage of the central character, Newman, by providing a piece of information which allows him to overcome the family pride which prevents him marrying Claire de Cintré. The conclusion finds Newman keeping the information to himself and Claire entering the order of Carmelites. Dowson's liking for such renunciations as in "The Diary of a Successful Man" may well have been partly derived from Meredith.

Dowson's representation of music as the supreme form of artistry can also be seen as a further debt to Pater. As I have shown earlier, for Pater, all art aspired towards the condition of music as both an example and an emblem of harmony of form and matter. In Meredith's *One of Our Conquerors* and "Souvenirs of an Egoist", it unites those who really love it.[297] In the former, Victor, his wife Nataly, and their daughter

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294 *Letters* 93.

295 *Letters* 101.

296 *Letters* 87.

297 In *Adrian Rome*, however, Brooke, one of Adrian's college friends remarks that, "I shall never deny that music has one great merit; it makes an admirable background for conversation; it fills up the interstices, and helps one to be suggestively unintelligible". (London: Methuen and Co., 1899) 31.

Nesta find their source of communication in opera. "Souvenirs of an Egoist" is an anti-romance, the story of a division between Anton and Ninette because, among other reasons, Ninette had no real feeling for her barrel-organ. This is clear when the Baron Anton Antonelli observes that Lady Greville, "in spite of her frivolity and affectations ... does love music at the bottom of her heart".[298] Ultimately, then, he can only connect with those who really love music. "She is one of the few persons whose praise of any of my compositions gives me any real satisfaction",[299] but only because she tells him, in his vanity, what he wishes to hear. So while Dowson presents music as negative in its production of egoism, it is also a means of escape and communication for Anton, for Cristich, and for Delphine.

I have already discussed Pater's affinity for music. In "The School of Giorgione" he goes on to advocate lyric poetry after music "precisely because in it we are least able to detach the matter from the form".[300] The best lyric poetry, according to Pater, is that in which meaning reaches us in ways not directly traceable to the understanding, and becomes a matter of pure perception. Many commentators have likened Dowson's poetry to music. An anonymous review of *Decorations* in *The Athenaeum* observed that Dowson "could set an exquisite moment to music",[301] while Aldous Huxley described the poetry as possessing the quality "of a music wearily drooping towards its close".[302]

In his poetry, song is often linked with positives. In "Villanelle of His Lady's Treasures" the poet extracts those qualities he loves best to make a villanelle. These

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This comment needs, I think, to be interpreted as more than an attempt by Dowson and Moore to be "Wildean", but shows that music and speech can complement each other. However, the choice of the "Wedding March" in this case casts a shadow of gloom over the assembled company.

298 *Stories* 28.

299 *Stories* 28.

300 Walter Pater, "The School of Giorgione," *Essays on Literature and Art*, ed. Jennifer Uglow (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1973) 46.

301 "*Decorations in Verse and Prose*. By Ernest Dowson" *Athenaeum* 3782 21 Apr. 1900: 490.

302 Aldous Huxley, "Ernest Dowson," *The English Poets* 5, ed. Thomas Humphry Ward (New York: Macmillan, 1918) 603.

include a "laugh most musical", and "her voice, a silver bell,[303] / As clear as song, as soft as prayer;" and in "Impenitentia Ultima", he desires that "the viols in her voice be the last sound in mine ear". The voice of the beloved is completely set apart from the streets of London as depicted in "Benedictio Domini".

It is usually the case, however, that music or song is only presented in a positive light in comparison with the present situation. For example, Dowson describes love "that was songful" in "The Garden of Shadow" but all that remains of it is "a broken lute". Similarly, in "Carthusians", "Our viols cease, our wine is death, our roses fail" and in "Exile":

> In music I have no consolation,
> No roses are pale enough for me;
> The sound of the waters of separation
> Surpasseth roses and melody.

Unlike Dion in "The Diary of a Successful Man" and Anton in "Souvenirs of an Egoist", music provides no consolation for the poet when human relationships collapse. Yet it is not the destructive force it is presented as in Dowson's stories. In the poetry, music carries with it positive associations and, when he wishes to forget, the poet is often calling for its cessation.

Silence, for Dowson, is either a communicative, speaking silence or a pure calm in which no communication takes place, while music can be a liberating form of communication or an agent of vanity and egoism. I have suggested, then, that this confusion is demonstrated most clearly in Dowson's short story, "The Diary of a Successful Man".

Dowson's unwillingness to state a clear preference for any medium is indicative of an anxiety about the ability of language to express meaning in any form. As he wrote of his relationship with Adelaide:

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[303] It is interesting to note that in "Benedictio Domini" Dowson uses the image of a "silver bell" to represent the only pleasant sound.

> I fear my affairs will not bear talking over or writing about. They are like a Chinese puzzle, and grow more confused and inextricable the closer one considers them.[304]

His best, and his most commercially successful, work was his verse, a combination of speech, of the written, of song, and of silence. The question now, given Dowson's fears about the validity of a shared language, centres on the relationship of his poetry to his audience.

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[304] *Letters* 266.

Chapter 5:

Dowson and the body

> To fix the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly; to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul: that is the ideal of decadence,[305]

according to Arthur Symons. Indeed, Dowling chooses "disembodied voices" as a chapter heading for her discussion of the poetry of Dowson, Johnson, and Symons in *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle.* Before I consider Dowson's voice and audience, however, it is necessary to establish how far Dowson establishes a "body" in his poetry from which to divorce his voice.

There is little evidence of a tangible body in Dowson's poetry. On the whole, he focuses on one aspect of his own body, often as an adjunct to the body of his mistress. For example, in "Ad Domnulam Suam", the poet's body exists only in relation to that of the "little lady" of his heart:

> Soon thou leavest fairy-land;
> Darker grow thy tresses:
> Soon no more of hand in hand;
> Soon no more caresses!

In this poem his hand bears little or no relation to his own body but exists as a supplement to the (similarly ethereal) body of his mistress. In "Terre Promise" the poet's body exists in much the same way, "Her hand upon my hand lay tranquilly". The parts of his own body which the poet realises, therefore, are similar to the body-parts of the girls on which he focuses in his poetry, such as hands, hair, and eyes. The body of the poet is explicitly given form as a protector of the child's body, as in "Villanelle of Sunset":

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[305] Arthur Symons, "The Decadent Movement in Literature," *Selected Writings* ed. Roger Holdsworth (Manchester: Carcanet, 1974) 76.

Tired flower! upon my breast,
I would wear thee alway.

Similarly, in the "Cynara" poem, the owner of the "bought red mouth" lies in the poet's arms all night, and his body only exists in relation to hers:

All night upon mine heart I felt her warm heart beat,
Night-long within mine arms in love and sleep she lay;

It is only in "Seraphita", collected in *Verses*, that there is a sense -- though it is a faint one -- that the poet possesses a complete body:

Come not before me now, O visionary face!
Me tempest-tost, and borne along life's passionate sea;
Troublous and dark and stormy though my passage may be;
Not here and now may we commingle or embrace,
Lest the loud anguish of waters should efface,
The bright illumination of thy memory,
Which dominates the night; rest, far away from me,
In the serenity of thine abiding-place!

But when the storm is highest, and the thunders blare,
And sea and sky are riven, O moon of all my night!
Stoop down but once in pity of my great despair,
And let thine hand, though over late to help, alight
But once upon my pale eyes and my drowning hair,
Before the great waves conquer in the last vain fight.

Perceiving life as a battle against an overwhelming sea, Dowson envisages the "last vain fight" against his sea of troubles, in which the hand of his mistress will reach down and touch his "pale eyes" and "drowning hair". Eyes and hair are, of course, favourite points of focus on the body of the mistress. Though it is unspecified, there is a sense of a whole body which is ultimately conquered by the storm and which is symbolised by his "pale eyes" and "drowning hair".

Likewise, in "Impenitentia Ultima", the speaker conceives of a time when:

I will praise Thee, Lord, in Hell, while my limbs are racked asunder,
For the last sad sight of her face and the little grace of an hour.

Dowson's body in his poetry, then, is a passive and implicit one. He can "see" without eyes, "hear" without ears, and while he has "lips" with which to kiss, he can "tread" without feet, as in "Amor Profanus", where he can both "wander" and "tread" with no tangible feet:

> For all too soon we two shall tread
> The bitter pastures of the dead:
> Estranged, sad spectres of the night.

The poet's body is an ethereal one, much like that of his mistress, a "sad spectre" of a "real" corporeal body. The body of Dowson's mistress is presented in his poetry as an amalgam of body-parts, each of which he describes in isolation. Chardin observes of "Vain Resolves" that the regularity of stanza two:

> "I shall forget her eyes, how cold they were;
> Forget her voice, how soft it was and low,
> With all my singing that she did not hear,
> And all my service that she did not know.
> I shall not hold the merest memory
> Of any days that were,
> Within those solitudes where I will fasten me."

points up the distinction between the coldness of her eyes and the more positive connotations of ingenuousness and softness in her voice. The rebirth of his desire is effected in this poem by the erotic charm of cold innocence. The key point, which Chardin identifies adroitly here, is that it is not the body of the woman -- scarcely or never mentioned -- which affects him, but abstracted elements of it, such as her eyes or hair:[306]

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[306] The "Other" in Dowson's poetry, according to Chardin, is no more than a projection of himself, an image relaying the image of himself which is revealed in the act of writing itself. The "I" then, is not *an* Other, but *the* Other. The mistress in the poetry is purely a product of the imagination, and one who frees the speaker's fantasies and is witness to the questions about the nature of being which nineties poets ceased to ask in their poetry. She reveals the chasms in the speaker's concept of the "self" which drives the poet on to question his own interiority and she throws light on the workings of his imagination.

> La description physique de la femme est souvent réduite à quelques notes centrées sur les yeux, la bouche, les mains ou la visage, comme si corps était intégralement absent.[307]

Dowson's mistress is usually then, as Chardin observes, "l'ephémère emblème de l'inconstance".[308] He argues further that in "Epigram":

> Because I am idolatrous and have besought,
> With grievous supplication and consuming prayer,
> The admirable image that my dreams have wrought
> Out of her swan's neck and her dark abundant hair:
> The jealous gods, who brook no worship save their own,
> Turned my live idol marble and her heart to stone.[309]

"La femme, éthérée jusqu'à la spiritualisation, est devenue une abstraction, une vision de l'âme".[310] Chardin goes on to consider the idea of the woman as just such an abstraction or "vision of the soul" in the "Cynara" poem. Here, according to Chardin, the anonymous nature of the prostitute is pitted against "Cynara", who is only identified as a form of spiritual beauty and who is the antithesis of the "fleshly" woman he is with. In Dowson's poetry both the poet's body and that of his mistress are represented by abstracted body-parts, and a sense of the whole body is rarely present.

Dowson, then, approaches Symons's ideal of "a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul". However, thus far I have used the term "poet" interchangeably with "Dowson", which suggests that the speaking "I" is identified with the poet. The fact that it is so easy to ally the two suggests that Dowson recorded not only a "disembodied voice", but also that he "revolt[ed] against

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307 Chardin 182.

308 Chardin 182. For a detailed examination of Dowson's attitude towards the young girl, of her function as guardian of innocence, and of the "dream-mistress", see Chardin's excellent chapter on "La Femme: variations sur une obsession fin de siècle". 145-203.

309 It is interesting to note that Dowson's conception of the mistress's stone heart is a reversal of the Pygmalion myth. The MS version of this poem entitled "The Requital" appears in *The Poetical Works of Ernest Dowson*, 186. Though the punctuation has been relaxed, ("and her heart -- a stone!" becomes "and her heart to stone"), it is almost identical to the poem which appeared as "Epigram" in *Verses*.

exteriority", using neither the mask nor the persona. We are tempted to identify the speaking voice with the poet making the utterance because it is essentially undramatic. But in recent years the distinction between "dramatic" and "undramatic" poetry has become increasingly confused.

Since the early 1980s Robert Langbaum's conception of the dramatic monologue in *The Poetry of Experience* has come under increasing scrutiny. Recent studies, which include a whole issue of *Victorian Poetry* dedicated to the subject, have provided some useful redefinitions of the dramatic monologue in relation to late Victorian poetry. David Lindley discusses the "blurring of this once decisive boundary"[311] between lyric and drama and cites Browning as a key innovator in methods of breaking away from Romantic subjectivity. Browning himself muddied the waters by proclaiming at the beginning of *Bells and Pomegranates* that:

> Such Poems as the following come properly enough, I suppose, under the head of "dramatic Pieces," being, though for the most part Lyric in expression, always Dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine.[312]

It is helpful first to identify the characteristics of dramatic monologues in so far as they can be said to share specific poetic devices. The poem is always in the form of a first-person speaker, but one who is a character manifestly different from the poet. Dramatic monologues are also usually situated in a specific time and place, and in a situation which is particular to the character and not to the poet. The presence of an auditor in the poem gives it a dramatic status. Colloquial language is not uncommon in the dramatic monologue and it can help to establish the relationship of the speaker to the auditor. Without the presence of the auditor the poem would usually be

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[310] Chardin 189.

[311] David Lindley, *Lyric* (London: Methuen, 1985) 12.

[312] "Advertisement" at the beginning of *Bells and Pomegranates* III (1842). Robert Browning, *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning* 4, ed. Ian Jack, Rowena Fowler and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

considered a soliloquy and as such we, as readers, would be convinced of the "sincerity" of the speaker.

Many commentators have taken issue with Langbaum's conception of the monologue. Langbaum stresses the sympathetic draw of the first-person speaker. He cites Browning's "My Last Duchess", as do many critics, as the archetypal dramatic monologue, and argues that the reader sympathises with the duke and therefore:

> we suspend moral judgment because we prefer to participate in the duke's power and freedom ... moral judgment is in fact important as the thing to be suspended, as a measure of the price we pay for the privilege of appreciating the man.[313]

Langbaum goes on to state that the split between moral judgment and sympathy is the essence of the dramatic monologue and that a "tension" which he identifies between them is "the key to the poem's form".[314]

However, it is now widely accepted, as Alan Sinfield[315] observes, that many dramatic monologues operate on the principle that the withdrawal of the poet points up the irony with which he presents the speaker's identity and views. Far from suspending moral judgment, we adopt a moral position which transcends that of the speaker. Ralph W. Rader takes his critique of Langbaum's conception of the dramatic monologue one stage further. Langbaum sets up a distinction between the dramatic monologue and the dramatic lyric, a dichotomy Rader feels to be inadequate for a full discussion of the possibilities in between. In his article "Notes on Some Structural Varieties and Variations in Dramatic 'I' Poems and Their Theoretical Implications",[316] Rader introduces two new categories, the mask lyric

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313 Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: W. Norton and Co. Inc., 1957) 83. Henceforth Langbaum.

314 Langbaum 85.

315 See Alan Sinfield, *Dramatic Monologue* (London: Methuen, 1977).

316 Ralph W. Rader, "Notes on Some Structural Varieties and Variations in Dramatic 'I' Poems and Their Theoretical Implications," *Victorian Poetry* 22 (1984): 103-20. Henceforth Rader.

and the expressive lyric. The former involves the construction of an artificial person, such as J. Alfred Prufrock in Eliot's poem, which provides both expression and escape from a subjective situation. The expressive lyric complicates Langbaum's original conception of the dramatic lyric just as the mask lyric complicates his conception of the dramatic monologue. As defined by Rader the expressive lyric is founded upon the uncertain identification of the speaking 'I' and the poet. The artful contrast between speaker and poet upon which the dramatic monologue hinges is absent from the expressive lyric and its very absence prompts us to call the speaker by the name of the poet.

In *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, Isobel Armstrong defines the expressive lyric as "feeling dramatised as soliloquy" and notes the absence of a public transaction between speaker and audience. Armstrong makes detailed reference to the work of J. S. Mill, who differentiates between the self-conscious manipulation of feeling by the orator and the unself-conscious affective emotional condition of the "true poet".[317] Mill's distinction between "eloquence" as "heard", and "poetry" as "overheard", however, suggests that the poet has no consciousness of an audience. Thus the expressive lyric is equated with a poetics of exclusion in which the poetic is defined as the "solitary work of the speaking subject over and against communality".[318]

Rader's extended conception of the dramatic monologue and dramatic lyric hinges on the fluidity of both concepts. He stresses that there are "different degrees of fullness of constructive realisation of a particular formal potentiality" -- in other words, that the texts which fall into these categories do so only loosely:

> The methodological consequence is that, in the application of formal principles to the interpretation of individual works, the conception of the

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317 Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993) 137. Henceforth Armstrong.

318 Armstrong 137. According to Mill, inward-looking, private poetry, which by this definition includes much of Dowson's poetry, approaches "monotony"!

> principle needs to be kept clear and distinct, so that its degree of 'fit' to the work can be given perspicuous statement.[319]

Indeed, the flexibility of Rader's approach lends itself to a consideration of nineties' poetry in relation to the dramatic monologue and dramatic lyric, if only because:

> when concept and work are not congruent, the critic can then conclude either that the principle is not the principle of the work and hypothesise a new, more adequate principle for it ... or take the incongruence as an objective indication of the work's only approximate realisation of a formal potentiality.[320]

Dowson was certainly aware of the technical merit of Browning's dramatic monologues, exclaiming in a letter to Arthur Moore upon:

> The subtility [*sic*], the tact of omission, the Morbidezza! "My Last Duchess," par exemple, is pure Henry James. I must have read it a dozen times before to-day: but I have only just appreciated the full subtility of it. It is wonderful.[321]

The omission which he praises characterises his own art, as does the suppression of the dramatic situation which Browning makes explicit.

For a study of Dowson's poetry and his relationship to his audience it is helpful to consider what Rader identifies as the absence of the artful contrast between speaker and poet in the expressive lyric -- an absence which prompts us to call the speaker by the name of the poet. But, if we consider "Vain Hope" and "Vain Resolves", it becomes apparent that the poetic persona is more variable than it might initially appear.

Ostensibly "Vain Hope" and "Vain Resolves" are different poems, but it is possible to read them as two versions of the same experience, which in turn poses the question, are the speakers one and the same?:

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[319] Rader 108.
[320] Rader 109.
[321] *Letters* 146.

Vain Hope

Sometimes, to solace my sad heart, I say,
Though late it be, though lily-time be past,
Though all the summer skies be overcast,
Haply I will go down to her, some day,
And cast my rests of life before her feet,
That she may have her will of me, being so sweet
And none gainsay!

So might she look on me with pitying eyes,
And lay calm hands of healing on my head:
"Because of thy long pains be comforted;
For I, even I, am Love: sad soul, arise!"
So, for her very graciousness, I might at last
Gaze on the very face of Love, and hold Him fast
In no disguise.

Haply, I said, she will take pity on me,
Though late I come, long after lily-time,
With burden of waste days and drifted rhyme:
Her kind, calm eyes, drooping down maidenly,
Shall change, grow soft: there yet is time, meseems,
I said, for solace; though I know these things are dreams
And may not be![322]

Indeed, both poems operate in the same way, with two stanzas of recollection or fantasy and a final stanza in which the speaker realises his self-deception:

Vain Resolves

I said: "There is an end of my desire:
Now I have sown, and I have harvested,
And these are the ashes of an ancient fire,
Which verily shall not be quickened.
Now will I take me to a place of peace,
Forget mine heart's desire;
In solitude and prayer, work out my soul's release.

"I shall forget her eyes, how cold they were;
Forget her voice, how soft it was and low,
With all my singing that she did not hear,
And all my service that she did not know.
I shall not hold the merest memory
Of any days that were,
Within those solitudes where I will fasten me."

[322] The original title for "Vain Hope" was "The Gate of Ivory", but Dowson has clearly changed the title to establish the connection with "Vain Resolves", which appears next in *Verses*.

And once she passed, and once she raised her eyes,
And smiled for courtesy, and nothing said:
And suddenly the old flame did uprise,
And all my dead desire was quickened.
Yea! as it hath been, it shall ever be,
Most passionless, pure eyes!
Which never shall grow soft, nor change, nor pity me.

In "Vain Hope" we are at least given some circumstantial detail. The setting is late summer and "all the summer skies [are] overcast". In "Vain Resolves",[323] the speaker gives us no indication of time or place, a paring down which takes it outside the role of dramatic.

In "Vain Hope" the speaker has an urge to prostrate himself at the feet of his mistress and offer his life up for her use. The second stanza is located in the realm of the dream, where he imagines that she will take on a sacerdotal role at his sacrifice and facilitate his quasi-religious vision of "Love". Rather uncharacteristically, the speaker of this poem desires a powerful woman who will take charge and by her "very graciousness", will allow him to "Gaze on the very face of Love". By presenting the mistress as a goddess of sorts the speaker introduces a profound sense of his own unworthiness. He wishes variously that she might "take pity" on him, "have her will" of him, and "heal" him, but the reality is that there is no change in her "kind, calm eyes",[324] nor likely to be. He knows, however, that his re-imaginings are only "for solace" and "these things are dreams".

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[323] See also Herbert P. Horne's similar poem, "Et Sunt Commercia Coeli" *The Eighteen-Nineties: A Period Anthology in Prose and Verse*, ed. Martin Secker (London: Richards Press, 1948) 218-9.

I did not raise my eyes to hers,
Although I knew she passed me near:
I said, "Her shadow round me stirs;
It is enough, that she is here,
And that, for once, my way is hers."

I did not look upon her face,
I knew with whom her heart confers;
For more, that moment had no place:
I did not raise my eyes to hers,
I did not look upon her face.

[324] The original manuscript version reads "calm, chaste eyes". "Kind, calm eyes" removes the overtly sexual element.

"Vain Resolves", I think, can be read as an alternative interpretation of the same experience. Once again, the speaker has failed to touch the heart of his mistress with her "pure" and "cold" eyes, "which never shall grow soft, nor change, nor pity me." Yet in this poem, the speaker appears at first to have renounced his "vain hope" and decided to obliterate the memory of his beloved in solitude and prayer. This may be the conventional Christian solitude and prayer, but it may equally be a pagan "working out" his soul's release. The speaker suggests that he did indeed prostrate himself in "service" to her, and his retreat into "solitude" may be further service to what he calls in "Epigram" his "live idol".

But, as the title of "Vain Resolves" indicates, Dowson's spiritual renunciative urge is thwarted and proves his resolve "vain". She passes him, raises her eyes, and smiles, with the result that his desire is rekindled from the ashes of an "ancient fire" -- a funeral pyre perhaps. The speaker then proclaims, in liturgical language, that "as it hath been, it shall ever be". His love will endure while she remains "passionless", never changing and never pitying him.

"Vain Hope" and "Vain Resolves" bear witness to the existence of more than one poetic speaking-voice in Dowson's poetry. So, while it is problematical to identify the speaking "I" with the poet, none of Dowson's poems can be called a dramatic monologue. They are, as Philip Hobsbaum has observed, "semi-dramatic projections". In the eighteen-nineties there was certainly a "cross-fertilisation"[325] between the monologue and the lyric. According to Dowling:

> By simultaneously loosening rhythm while compressing vocabulary, Dowson has made the lyric and dramatic modes converge in a single contemporary speaking voice, a feat of style that instructed Eliot when he came to write "The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock".[326]

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[325] Philip Hobsbaum, *Tradition and Experiment in English Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1979) 249.

[326] Dowling 211. The emphasis here must be on the term "instructed" since none of Dowson's poems can be called a mask lyric in the way that Eliot's can.

We have seen that Dowson's poems, which we may wish to call "expressive lyrics" because of the uncertain identification between poet and speaker, are something more complex than Armstrong's definition of "feeling *dramatised* as soliloquy".[327] Similarly, if we test the attributes of the dramatic monologue against, for example, the "Cynara" poem, we find that this work both adheres to as well as resists analysis on such structural terms. The first person narrator is present, but there is no clear distinction between the poet and his constructed speaker Compression of vocabulary in Dowson's poetry is a well-taken point, but any loosening of rhythm is questionable.[328] In the "Cynara" poem, as in most of Dowson's poetry, the rhythm is extremely well-controlled:

> I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind,
> Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,
> Dancing, to put thy pale lost lilies out of mind;
> But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
> Yea, all the time, because the dance was long:
> I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

The poet never wholly plunges into the vernacular, but his "bought red mouth" demonstrates his competing allegiances. Red is a colour traditionally associated with danger and indeed with sin. The antithesis of a "bought red mouth" and "pale, lost lilies" operates within the traditional Dowsonian colour-scheme of red and white. Moreover, it emphasises two separate spheres in which something red and implicitly sinful can be bought and something white and implicitly virginal is lost. Thus the symbol of the lily works within the high literary mode, whilst that of the "bought red mouth" belongs to the realm of the ordinary, and flawed, world. What Dowson achieves in this poem, then, is a blend of speaking voices which does not converge in

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[327] Armstrong 137.

[328] Dowling may be thinking of Yeats, who observed of his "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" that it was "my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music. I had begun to loosen rhythm as an escape from rhetoric and from that emotion of the crowd that rhetoric brings." W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* 153.

a "single contemporary speaking voice" but fluctuates between voices, the present and the past, literary language and "natural" spoken idiom.

Expressive lyrics and their variants, then, pose the question, "If the soliloquist is solipsist, speaking to himself, who is the addressee of private poetry?"[329] Indeed, in Dowson's "Cynara" poem the relationship with the audience is excluded, since no space for dialogue exists. However, we can answer this question in part by returning to Mill's suggestion that "the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener".[330] Though this is clearly not the case with the dramatic lyric, Mill's definition seems to provide a useful model for a study of Dowson's poetry.

Both dramatic monologues and dramatic lyrics, as well as the forms which fall between these two poles, silence the "other" of the text, although there is necessarily some degree of reciprocity in the dramatic monologue. One of the functions of the auditor in the monologue is to assist with the comprehension of events as they unfold and to participate in the action. However, Hobsbaum's use of the term "semi-dramatic" becomes more pertinent if we consider W. J. Fox's interpretation of the politics of dramatic form as outlined by Armstrong.[331] Though Dowson's lyrics are not "dramatic" by making recourse to personae and dialogue, they are certainly "dramatic" in the sense that mental phenomena are externalised as events which can be examined as in "Vain Hope" and "Vain Resolves". The speaker's contrasting emotional states are externalised in the poetry, which is exclusive on the one hand but also open to scrutiny on the other.

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329 Armstrong 138.

330 John Stuart Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," *The Victorian Poet: Poetics and Persona*, ed. Joseph Bristow (1867: London: Croom Helm, 1987) 37.

331 W. J. Fox's views on dramatic form in poetry are quoted in Armstrong 136-46. She outlines Fox's interpretation of the variants of the form as set out in *Westminster Review* 12 (1830): 5.

Dowson, however, was sceptical about any commonality of feeling among men. This scepticism is reflected in his language, as is his solipsism. Unlike Yeats,[332] he had very little sense of an audience. Indeed, he was almost anti-audience. Northrop Frye's argument in "Approaching the Lyric"[333] seems, in part, to elucidate the stimuli for Dowson's poetry. Frye suggests that the private poem is generated by something which blocks normal activity, such as frustrated love[334] or bereavement. Where this block is transparent, argues Frye, it is metamorphosed into a lyric of mental focus.[335] The result is a poem of intense concentration of emotion and of imagery, as well as a revolt from sequential experience -- presumably with little thought of an audience.

Armstrong sees the longing for solitude present in much nineties poetry as a reversal of the Tennysonian anxieties of isolation: "this is the poetics of the privileged and aristocratic individual imagination, the cult of aura".[336] She concludes that Victorian poetry did not die with Tennyson and Browning. Their late work, she argues, coincided with the formation of conditions central to twentieth-century poetry. These include the marginalisation of the poet, the fragmentation of literary and cultural life into coteries, the depoliticisation of poetry through the symbol, and the final breakdown of the idea of a coherent bourgeois audience for literature. Dowson was no great lover of the reading public; "O great, ineffably stupid beast, the public!"[337] As Eric Griffiths in *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* explains,

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332 For a discussion of Yeats and his audience, see Andrew Parkin, "Public and Private Voice in Yeats's Poetry," *Anglo-Irish and Irish Literature: Aspects of Language and Culture*, eds. Birgit Bramsbäck and Martin Croghan (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 1988) 67-73.

333 Northrop Frye, "Approaching the Lyric," *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (London: Cornell University Press, 1985) 31-7.

334 The poetry of the 1890s has often been linked with that of the cavalier poets. Frye's identification of frustrated love as an obstacle to normal activity and henceforth a stimulus to poetic creation reinforces this connection.

335 Frye cites Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" as an example of this.

336 Armstrong 481. Yeats wrote to his father in 1910 of the Rhymers' Club that "The doctrine of the group was that lyric poetry should be personal." W. B. Yeats, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954) 547-8.

337 *Letters* 180.

however, Tennyson is much more concerned with the question of vocalisation than any of the poets of the fin de siècle (excepting possibly Yeats), and much of his fear of isolation derives explicitly from the loss of the voice occasioned by death.[338]

Armstrong continues that the solipsism of expressive emotion privately experienced leads to delusions, mania, and "visions of total power as the speaking subject relinquishes relationships".[339] The relinquishing of relationships is fundamental to Dowson's poetry, but it operates not via mania or delusions, rather through self-abnegation and deliberate renunciation:

> Thy kisses chill my heart,
> Our lips are cold; averted eyes avow
> The twilight of pure love: we can but part,
> Dumbly and sadly, reaping as we sow,
> Love's aftermath.

So, whilst we can argue that Dowson's renunciative urge does not result from delusions caused by solipsism, it may be true that in his art we find the "emergence of private contracts which come about directly as a result of the speaker's belief that they are exempt from public contracts and institutional agreements".[340]

Dowson's renunciative urge does not necessarily mean that his is anti-social art. His speakers do not, as Armstrong claims, believe themselves to be "exempt from public contracts and institutional agreements".[341] Rather, they are too acutely aware of the unreliability of lovers' vows, which frequently appear in his poetry as "broken". The contracts between speakers in Dowson's poetry and their addressees are intensely private, as well as timeless. Though the reader believes that the mistress is present in many of the poems (as in "Flos Lunae" by her "cold eyes"), she

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338 Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 106.
339 Armstrong 139.
340 Armstrong 140.
341 Armstrong 140.

may not be. She has no voice, and indeed there is no space for dialogue since there is no conceivable response to Dowson's (overheard?) lyrics.

By avoiding the contemporary, both situationally and in the naming of the beloved, his poetry achieves a timelessness, heightened by the explicit urge to evade temporal phenomena, as in the poem which begins "Cease smiling, Dear!":

> Here in thy garden, through the sighing boughs,
> Beyond the reach of time and chance and change,
> And bitter life and death, and broken vows,
> That sadden and estrange.

Broken vows both distance the lovers and make the vows themselves strange and defamiliarised. Hence there is a further consequence of solipsistic expression: the abolition of time.

In the "Cynara" poem, although some time-span is indicated by the term "yesternight", there is no clear delineation of time. The poem blurs the time-scale of events, whilst in "Cease smiling, Dear!" we find an overt desire to be "beyond the reach of time and chance and change". By suppressing the dramatic elements which Browning, for example, would have made explicit, Dowson actually effects the abolition of time which his speakers crave. As Armstrong observes, this occurs in the expressive lyric because events need not take place in a causal sequence. With reference to Browning's "Johannes Agricola", she states that, "temporality is there to define his freedom from it".[342] This is equally the case for Dowson's speakers, perhaps as a result of what Frye identifies as the obstacle to normal activity which produces the poetry. The emphasis is on a past moment, one which he wishes to perpetuate in his mind and art, ("O could this moment be perpetuate!").[343]

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342 Armstrong 140.

343 For a detailed examination of Dowson's relationship to the past see Chris Snodgrass, "Aesthetic Memory's Cul-de-Sac: The Art of Ernest Dowson." *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920* 35 (1992): 26-53.

Moreover, in trying to achieve a timelessness by largely avoiding the contemporary, Dowson firmly situates himself as a poet of the fin de siècle. Despite having little or no sense of an audience, as I have suggested, Dowson's is not necessarily anti-social art. The role of the poet as prophet or seer had, of course, diminished by the nineties.[344] Yeats recorded in *Modern Poetry* that:

> The aim of my friends ... if it sometimes made us prefer the acorn to the oak, the small to the great, freed us from many things that we thought an impurity. Swinburne, Tennyson, Arnold, Browning, had admitted so much psychology, science, moral fervour ... We did not look forward or look outward.[345]

According to W. David Shaw,[346] the late Victorian "purist" art advocated by the Rhymers followed Pater's dictates in segregating the spiritual territory of art from that of the everyday world. This move was, as Shaw notes, concurrent with a growing agnosticism from the seventies onwards. Indeed, Pater and his disciples saw art as its own end, having no reference beyond itself. According to Shaw, it is only when God has diminished to the level of supreme fiction -- that is, when agnosticism has become the general condition -- that poetry can become the new sacred centre, since the higher order by which to judge it has been removed.[347]

However, Dowson's poetry is not God-forsaking, nor is it entirely world-forsaking. As many of his poems bear witness, such as "Extreme Unction", he was drawn to the Roman Catholic church:

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344 As John M. Munro remarks, many nineties poets "felt that they were above the crowd, aesthetically more refined than their fellows". *The Decadent Poetry of the 1890s* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1990) 62. This attitude led to a disparagement of their work for not expressing "universal" emotions.

345 W. B. Yeats, *Modern Poetry* (London: BBC, Broadcasting House, 1936) 11.

346 W. David Shaw, *The Lucid Veil: Poetic Truth in the Victorian Age* (London: Athlone Press, 1987) 10.

347 For a consideration of the deprivation of the "imaginative life" as expressed in the literature of the nineties, see John A. Lester, Jr., *Journey Through Despair 1880-1914: Transformations in British Literary Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968) chapter 2, 19-52. Lester examines the causes for the growing agnosticism and, more generally, the demolition of the "necessary axioms" of knowing "that there is an eternal truth consonant to man's being, and ... that man is gifted with a faculty capable of perceiving at least a glimmer of that truth". 21.

Yea, when the walls of flesh grow weak,
In such an hour, it well may be,
Through mist and darkness, light will break,
And each anointed sense will see.

and has an often forlorn, but abiding, faith in his mistress:

Ah might it be, that just by touch of hand,
Or speaking silence, shall the barrier fall;
And she shall pass, with no vain words at all,
But droop into mine arms, and understand!

It is paradoxical that a poet so drawn to song, sound, and metrical considerations should produce a poetry of such solipsism and concern with silence. The problems which I have identified with regard to the speaking voice and the body, as well as the concerns and diction of his poetry, not only indicate, but also respond to, linguistic changes at the end of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 6:

Correspondence

"Dowson was imbued with a Gallic taste that was more than a tourist's love of Brittany".[348] Evidence of Dowson's liking for France and for the French language is rarely absent from his work. He spent a significant part of his life in Paris and in Pont-Aven. Many of Dowson's short stories are set in Brittany, his letters are peppered with French words and phrases, and he often chooses French verse forms, such as the villanelle and rondeau. Jepson recalls that:

> I think he was happiest in the remote Breton villages, whither he now and again withdrew himself, from which he wrote his most delightful letters. They used to give me the impression that the world went well with him there.[349]

The world probably did "go well" with Dowson in Brittany, since his letters bear witness to a more frugal existence and nurturing of the creative impulse. His visits to Brittany did, however, intensify his depression upon returning to Britain:

> Hercle! though, how I detest this cursed London: it gives me a sort of mental asthma whenever I return to it after an absence -- however short. No it is not London -- it is Great Britain. It was a cynical star which dropped me on these islands.[350]

Reasons of economy prompted Dowson's removal from Paris to Brittany in 1896 and he found a temporary home at the Hôtel Gloanec for six months. Gauguin, in the previous decade, had been advised by fellow painter Duval that, "Madame Gloanec, who ran one of the pensions there was prepared to extend long credit".[351] So Dowson inherited an artistic tradition on arrival at Pont-Aven:

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348 Desmond Flower, introduction, *The Poetical Works of Ernest Dowson* (London: Cassell and Co., 1934) 22.
349 Edgar Jepson, "The Real Ernest Dowson," *Academy* 73 2 Nov. 1907: 95.
350 *Letters* 60.
351 Quoted in Arts Council, *Gauguin and the Pont-Aven Group* (London: Curwen Press, 1966) 5.

> The lesser lights of Pont-Aven were men of the 1890s -- aesthetes, seekers after new sensations, deeply fascinated by esoteric learning and by religious problems. The outburst of creative activity was to be of short duration only.[352]

Many of Dowson's stories and poems are set in France, but are, perhaps, of less interest for their settings than for the way Dowson mixes various linguistic elements. "Souvenirs of an Egoist", the first story in Longaker's collection, begins with the Horatian lament "eheu fugaces!" and is immediately juxtaposed with Dowson's characteristic use of French almost as freely as he uses English:

> EHEU FUGACES! How that air carries me back, that air ground away so unmercifully, *sans* tune, *sans* time on a hopelessly discordant barrel-organ, right underneath my window.[353]

Even the title relies more heavily on the French meaning of "souvenirs" as "remembrances" rather than on the Anglicised definition which has come to mean specifically material "keepsakes". However, the narrator remarks early in the story that:

> Even my nationality I could not state precisely, though I know I am as much Italian as English, perhaps rather more. From Italy I have inherited my genius and enthusiasm for art, from England I think I must have got my common-sense, and the capacity of keeping the money which I make.[354]

Despite this protestation, and the description of his portrait which marks Anton out as conspicuously Latin in appearance, ("a boy with huge, black eyes, and long curls of the same colour"[355]), the narrator never allows Anton to use the language of his birth -- though Dowson was undoubtedly familiar with Italian -- preferring English, French and occasionally Latin.

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352 *Gauguin and the Pont-Aven Group* 16.
353 *Stories* 14.
354 *Stories* 15.
355 *Stories* 31.

"Souvenirs of an Egoist" demonstrates Dowson's tendency to use a French word when the English language proves inadequate to his meaning. Moreover, by using "*sans*" rather than the English equivalent of "without", Dowson succeeds in conveying something of the atmosphere he is later to evoke of the life of two street children in Paris. The whole story is summed up in this word. Ninette and Anton lack parents, a proper home, and money. As the story progresses, Ninette loses Anton and he, in turn, whilst gaining the patronage of Lady Greville and an outlet for his art, loses the ability to love:

> I have never let myself be troubled by what is commonly called "love." To be frank with you, I do not much believe in it.[356]

"Souvenirs of an Egoist" is possibly Dowson's most "artificial" story since the tale of the two children, Anton and Ninette, is recounted in English -- the language which the Baron Antonio Antonelli has adopted -- but it is English riddled with French expressions. The narrator's awareness of the two languages with which he is working is made explicit:

> "You are to come with me," [Felix Leominster] said authoritatively, speaking in French, but with an English accent.[357]

However, the extended word choice which Dowson is afforded by working in two languages makes the childrens' speech seem over-stylised and, at times, mawkish:

> "Don't cry, little boy," said Ninette grandly; "I will take care of you. If you like, you shall live with me. We will make a *ménage* together."[358]

The improbability of a *gamine* addressing a "little boy" as such is marked but, as the title suggests, the narrator is working from his remembrances and, adulterated as they may be, there is a strong impression of Ninette as Anton's benefactress.

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356 *Stories* 32.
357 *Stories* 26.

The usual convention in Victorian fiction is to give children a simplicity of speech. Even a complex character such as Maggie Tulliver is given straightforward, if passionate, speech:

> "O Lucy," she burst out, after kissing her, "you'll stay with Tom and me, won't you? O kiss her, Tom."[359]

But Ninette and Anton, even in their private exchanges, are given the speech of miniature adults. Ninette asks Anton, "What is thy name, *p'tit*?"[360] while he indulges in passionate outbursts which display his artistic temperament:

> "Don't," I cried, pushing her away, "you can't understand, Ninette; you can only grind an organ -- just four tunes, always the same. But I loved my fiddle, loved it! loved it!" I cried passionately.[361]

Literature demands, of course, that speech be tidied up for the printed page, but even so, there is a curious uniformity about the dialogue in Dowson's stories. At the end of a century in which great changes were occurring in the representation of speech, we have only to look to Arthur Morrison to see what forms such experimentation took. Morrison's intention was to reproduce the Cockney slang of the slums -- speech patterns, inflection and grammar. The speech of Dowson's characters appears homogenised in the light of such experimentations. Anton and Ninette are largely undifferentiated in their speech, as are Lady Greville and Felix Leominster. Ninette is only slightly differentiated from Anton by her use of French words such as "*tiens*" and "*v'la*".

Dowson's protagonist, Anton who lacks a surname, becomes the Baron Antonio Antonelli, but "that is merely an extension of the old concise Anton, so far as I know,

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358 *Stories* 16.
359 George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860; London: Penguin, 1979) 117.
360 *Stories* 17.
361 *Stories* 21.

the only name I ever had".[362] Though the name has changed along with Anton's status as a world-renowned musician, the stem remains, both of the name and of the boy. Society expects the name to fit the image of the man and, to accommodate this, Dowson invests his protagonist with a grand title. Ninette, on the other hand, is known only by her christian name, a diminutive form which also suggests a negative in French.[363]

It is not only Dowson's story which combines diverse linguistic elements. Before looking in detail at Dowson's translations and French verse forms, his "delightful" letters demand some attention for the way in which he combines diverse linguistic elements. If we consider a representative letter of Dowson's to Moore, it is clear that Dowson's colloquial style is a hybrid style composed of diverse elements:

> Mon Vieux,
>
> Thanks for yours. I was afflicted with an abnormal lethargy yestdy which must excuse my silence ... In the evening I slacked & eventually met Image & Horne at midnight outside the "back door" of the Alhambra! & was introduced to various trivial coryphées ... By the bye -- I see that my "Diary of a Successful Man" is advertized for appearance in Feb. Good old chequelet. How I shall curse if it's less than a tenner.
>
> ... I am glad you are not reduced à vomir over Ysabeau etc. I am afraid it's awfully high-falutin. I meant to write one chapter more -- but whereof I know not. If you think it should end there it shall. That must be considered when we meet & I prithee, mon respectable ami, let the meeting be soon.[364]

The most striking feature of his letters is that Dowson uses French as freely as he does English and without differentiating it from the body of the letter written in English. Dowson was so proficient in French -- and was also translating from French to English -- that alternating between the two languages, using French constructions

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362 *Stories* 17.

363 Doubtless, the name derived, in part, from Dowson's attachment to "Nixie" in the play of the same name by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Of the production in the Globe Theatre in 1890, Dowson wrote to Moore, "'Nixie' is a clever child enough but not as pretty as Mignon or my little Missy herself". *Letters* 148.

364 *Letters* 132.

such as "I believe -- en passant -- that I have trapped the influenza!"[365] (from "attraper la gripe") and indeed playful corruption of French, (such as "swarry" for "soirée"[366]), came easily to him.

I would suggest that Dowson's use of English, French, Latin, and sometimes Greek, as the "ordinary language" of his letters does not demonstrate a parodic mode of decadence or a particular "linguistic self-consciousness", but extends what Dowling calls his "verbal palette" which, as I have shown, is deliberately limited in his verse. Where the story is self-aware, the letters are fluent. The juxtaposition of "à vomir" and "high-falutin" is also noteworthy. "High-falutin", of course, signifies a ridiculously pompous style -- a category into which "à vomir" could potentially fall! Such close juxtaposition highlights the disparate linguistic elements which make up Dowson's informal written style. Archaisms such as "whereof" -- which are carried over into his poetry -- give the letter an oddly "high-falutin" feel.

Undoubtedly, Dowson intended not only to inform but also to entertain Moore, and his letters are surely representative of their conversational mode. Based at Bridge Dock, Dowson was unable to spend as much time with his friends as he might have liked and observes further in the letter previously quoted, "My correspondence has assumed enormous dimensions of late & is one of the most consoling parts of my existence".[367] Perhaps Dowson relished the freedom to use slang and "everyday" language. The familiar style was not, of course, appropriate for his work at the dock, his verse, or even his novels.

His use of slang, such as "oof" and the colloquial "tenner" to refer to money, not only establishes a degree of exclusiveness between himself and his correspondent, but also gives a greater freedom of expression than Standard English might afford.

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[365] *Letters* 121.

[366] *Letters* 148. This corruption of French may well be derived from Dickens. "Swarry," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989 cites Pickwick Papers, (1837), chapter 37, "A friendly swarry, consisting of a boiled leg of mutton with the usual trimmings".

To that end, Dowson uses the diminutive suffix "let", as in "chequelet," in order to reveal his misgivings about the size of payment for his story.

Unfortunately, Moore's responses to Dowson's letters have not survived, but if we consider the correspondence of some of their contemporaries, it is clear that the disparate elements which make up Dowson's familiar written style are by no means common. Symons's letters employ none of the features which I have identified in Dowson's letters. Instead, his letters are written almost entirely in Standard English even to his closest friends. When Symons writes to James Dykes Campbell, Honorary Secretary of the Browning Society, that, "I am reading no English now -- chiefly the extraordinary books of Monsieur le Comte de Villiers de l'Isle Adam",[368] his letters are still written without the free flow between English and French which characterises Dowson's correspondence. In the same letter he observes:

> Now that so much French rubbish is being translated I should like to see those *Contes cruels* taken in hand for a change.

Clearly, Symons's attitude to French literature does not equate to Dowson's approbation of all things French. Selective in his choice of French literature, Symons restricts himself to a use of the French language in his correspondence only where it cannot be avoided. Even while claiming, two years later, that:

> I am by this time getting so Parisian that the thought of London fills me with horror. I am contemplating permanent residence here; have forgotten *most* of my English (though I can still write it fairly well) and have begun to write in French for the "public prints."[369]

Symons was still using homogenous English. To have forgotten most of his English was, of course, a huge overstatement of the case. Nevertheless, Symons makes the

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[367] *Letters* 132.
[368] *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters 1880-1935*, Karl Beckson and John M. Munro, eds. (London: Macmillan, 1989) 35.
[369] Dowling 67.

point that alternating between the two languages does not come naturally to him. Writing in French for the "public prints" was, no doubt, something of an effort for Symons and demanded more precision than everyday French speech. Like Dowson, he appears to view France as a refuge from London,[370] but Symons does not share Dowson's confident use of the language. In Symons's letters, then, we do not find the hybrid style favoured by Dowson which effortlessly mixes French and English, slang and high literary language.[371]

Accordingly, Symons also displays an extremely conservative, as well as class-based, view of slang. In the first letter to Campbell, he asks:

> ... What do you think were the last words said to me last year? I met a woman in the street: "Are the public houses open, gaffer?" she said. (gaffer is a term used here actually in *respect* -- respectful familiarity, one might say.) I thought that was rather picturesque.[372]

However, whilst being both class-based and conservative, Symons's analysis of the connotations of the word "gaffer" is also clear and accurate.

Such accuracy of description on Symons's part is not in keeping with the notion of literary decadence as a form of linguistic disorder. Symons is clearly not used to hearing working-class vernacular. Though, like Dowson, Symons was mixing in circles in which he must have encountered quite a lot of slang, such as the music

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[370] Dowson wrote to Plarr from Le Faouet in August 1892, "Alas I shall be in London this day week. But I shall return and live here", *Letters* 239.

[371] I am using the term "high literary language" to describe the Paterian style, as outlined in the second chapter, favoured by Dowson. It is also interesting to note here that Dowson's original title for "The Story of a Violin" was "Fin de Siècle". In the final version, all his stories have been given English titles, but Dowson's original title demonstrates that the phrase "fin de siècle" was in regular use at the end of the nineteenth-century. The better known example appears in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

> "Fin de siècle," murmured Lord Henry.
> "Fin du globe," answered his hostess.

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Isobel Murray (1891; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 179.

[372] *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters 1880-1935*, eds. Karl Beckson and John M. Munro (London: Macmillan, 1989) 35. Dowson often referred to his father as "my governor", *Letters* 90.

halls,[373] Symons's tone is patronising. Similarly, there is virtually no slang to be found in Symons's correspondence and very little non-standard use of language. This is also true of his poetry and prose. The letters of Wilde, Beerbohm, and Beardsley are also written either entirely in French or entirely in English. Dowson's style in his familiar letters, then, was not congruent with that of his peers.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines slang as "the special vocabulary used by any set of persons of low or disreputable character; language of a low and vulgar type",[374] and also as "language of highly colloquial type, considered as below the level of Standard educated speech, and consisting either of new words or of current words employed in some special sense".[375]

In May 1888, only a year previous to Dowson's letter to Moore, Charles Mackay's response to Albert Barrèrre's history of slang appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Mackay's article, "English Slang and French *Argot*", both objected to new words, ("highly favoured by people of more or less education are those to which they affix the syllable "dom," on the supposition that ... "dom" may be added *ad libitum* to any adjective or substantive in the language"[376]), as well as "ignorance of the meaning of the word"[377]:

> Of late years, literature and society have shown an unmistakable tendency to disinter from the unliterary depths of the still current speech of the very lowest classes of the people, many hundreds of words that are not to be found

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> The rather flat notes of a man's voice float out into the clear air, singing the refrain of a popular music-hall ditty. There is something incongruous between the melody and the surroundings. It seems profane, indelicate, to bring this slangy, vulgar tune, and with it the mental picture of footlight flare and fantastic dance into the lovely freshness of this perfect spring day.

George Egerton, "A Cross Line," *Keynotes and Discords* (1893; London: Virago, 1983) 1. It is curious, given his affinity for the music-hall, that Symons should find the use of slang remarkable. Dowson was familiar with Egerton's *Keynotes*, demanding of Elkin Mathews and John Lane, "Would you kindly let me know, about how much more material you would require to make up a volume uniform with 'Keynotes'?" *Letters* 301.

374 "Slang" *Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed. 1989 1.b 651.

375 "Slang" *Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed. 1989 1.c 651.

376 Charles Mackay, "English Slang and French *Argot*: Fashionable and Unfashionable," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 143 May 1888: 697. Henceforth Mackay.

377 Mackay 697.

> in the dictionaries. These words ... are now included under the generic name of "slang." But the "slang" of our time is by no means confined to anachronisms, and includes many legitimate words, perverted from their legitimate meanings, and used in a sense sometimes ludicrous, and always offensive to the ear and a correct taste.[378]

Mackay perceived such speech-based use of language to spring "from the follies and vices of a civilisation in an advanced state of rottenness".[379] Charles Whibley, in *The Fortnightly Review* of 1899 denied that "the people" had any control over language, or had, at best, a "suspensory veto".[380] But ultimately, Mackay and Whibley were arguing together that authority over language must lie in the hands of "real artists" who should avoid slang and exercise "clarity of expression".[381]

Dowling's chapter "The Decay of Literature" examines the view, quite widely held at the end of the nineteenth century, that there was an analogy, (often specifically linguistic), between the decline of Rome[382] and the Victorian fin de siècle:

> literary language, be it the Latin of Horace or the English of Shakespeare, was viewed as dead or decaying just as it succeeded in preserving itself from the ceaseless change and variation of approximate, impermanent human speech.[383]

This perception was largely left over from eighteenth-century ideas and, as Dowling observes:

> To any Victorian at all aware of the conventional and ennobling equation between the English nation and the language of Shakespeare and Milton, then, the new scientific philology should have seemed an influence so subversive as to portend little less than cultural degeneration and collapse, the

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378 Mackay 691.

379 Mackay 701. Mackay is, no doubt, influenced by Théophile Gautier's preface to Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Paris: M. Livy Frères, 1876, 17, in which he writes, "On peut rappeler ... la langue marbrée dèjà des verdeurs de la décomposition".

380 Charles Whibley, "Language and Style," *Fortnightly Review* 71 Jan. 1899:106.

381 Charles Whibley, "Language and Style," *Fortnightly Review* 71 Jan. 1899:106.

382 It is interesting that there appeared to be no school of thought which suggested that there might be a rebirth out of decline (such as the birth of Christian Europe after the fall of Rome).

383 Dowling 67.

> sort of apocalypse that would a few years later lead many in the Victorian fin de siècle to see in Decadent writing, with its linguistically sanctioned use of non-literary language and slang, a harbinger of "public calamity, perplexity, war, and revolution."[384]

Mackay conflates the use of slang, English or French, with "dangerous classes of low-life"! Asserting that "language, being a living thing, must, like other living things, pass through its infancy, maturity, and decay", Mackay considers French "*argot*" to be "still more prolific and abundant" than "modern English and American"[385] slang. The idea of language as an organism subject to growth and to decay was a common one in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It was widely believed that late Latin's resistance to change both led to its demise and to the rise of European vernaculars:

> Even after Max Müller corrected this misapprehension by showing that the European vernaculars had in fact grown up by the side of Latin, the belief that "the single language of civilised Rome was succeeded by linguistic anarchy and barbarism" was widespread.[386]

In fact, Latin was still changing until the Renaissance period, when the classics were "rediscovered". Because the only kind of Latin that came to be valued was that written, Latin became a frozen form, used only in England by the learned.

Mackay certainly appears to view a decaying language as the result of mass literacy (and perhaps a perception of lowered standards) and an increase in "dangerous classes of low-life". His perception of slang and argot as an "assault on written language" was by no means unusual. As Dowling notes:

> To a Victorian ideal of civilisation founded on the equation of literature and nation, however, a far more menacing implication of the phonetic premise was that language was identical with living speech.[387]

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384 Dowling 67.
385 Mackay 698.
386 Dowling 85.
387 Dowling 65.

Mackay voices precisely this widespread fear of the devaluation of literature since:

> The people who talk slang and think slang, and who, if they perpetrate books that they call "realistic," take a pleasure in writing "slang," do not care to remember that "realism" in art or literature is not necessarily either a merit or a beauty, but may be a defect and an offence.[388]

His observation that those who "talk slang" will necessarily "think slang" pre-empts the philological movement which was to assert that the thought process is necessarily governed by the language available. Mackay is suggesting that it is not only the language of these people, but also their thought which is debased. Mackay blames a "literary fashion ... that preferred to import exotic synonyms when native growth would have been sufficient for use and beauty"[389] -- the movement which came to be known as literary decadence. Mackay's view is based, in part, on the affinity for French literature among young writers and also on the perceived rejection of "words that have been sanctified by such writers as Gower, Chaucer, and Spenser".[390] The fear, then, is that it is not only words which are being rejected, but the entire literary heritage. When he says that "Democracy ... is the real parent of vulgar slang", Mackay is referring not to a political system, but to what Dowling calls a "linguistic democracy" in which all have access to language and, therefore, the potential to "pervert ... [words] from their legitimate meanings".

While ostensibly recognising that the English language has "its own inherent capability" for change, and indeed the necessity for a language to adapt itself to the needs of its speakers, Mackay deplores "the evil influence of a literary fashion that despised the strong and massive vernacular, and preferred to import exotic synonyms when the native growth would have been sufficient for use and beauty".[391] This perspective suggests, as Dowling observes, that foreign words were seen in some

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388 Mackay 695.
389 Mackay 691.
390 Mackay 690.

quarters as subversive, probably as a result of the identification with the French "yellow backed novels" which so influenced Dorian Gray.

The notion of language as an organism subject, ultimately, to decay, was not the only fin de siècle misapprehension. The new philology propounded by the Neogrammarians held that language was simply an institution established by, and existing only through, its speakers, and that sound-laws had no exceptions. They discredited the idea of an organic unity, focusing simply on the notions of change and the regularity of sound-laws. With the "conception of language as spoken utterance entirely", the Neogrammarians "inevitably insisted that language treated independently of its speakers was a dangerously misleading abstraction".[392] In other words, they stressed the primacy of speech. Nordau, in *Degeneration*, famously opposed this view:

> To bring the word, pregnant with thought, back to the emotional sound is to renounce all the results of organic development, and to degrade man, rejoicing in the power of speech, to the level of the whining cricket or the croaking frog.[393]

With the benefit of hindsight, we know both the insistence on mere sound language, as well as the notion of the organic unity of language to be misconceptions. Yet Nordau's comments are interesting, (if typically sensationalising), because he suggests the advent of a new philology which would recognise that words are inextricably bound to the thought process, and also because he upholds the idea of an organic unity in the language.

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391 Mackay 690.

392 Dowling 82. See also Dowling's chapter "The Decay of Literature" 46-103, for an excellent full discussion of new philology.

393 Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (1895; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1968) 139. Though Nordau opposed the Neogrammarian views, he conceded that for the "decadent" state of mind " a new and unheard of language must ... be found ... It is absolutely arbitrary to seek for an example and a model of 'decadent' expression in the language of the Later Roman Empire", which seems to suggest an increase in, for example, slang and neologisms, 300.

Mackay's article is of particular interest since one of his primary objections is to the importation of foreign words[394] -- thus limiting change -- while at the same time he advocates language change. Peter Nicholls writes of what he calls "the decadent cult of the rare word" that:

> The tremendous power of the foreign or "alien" word is frequently invoked in [decadent] style so as to create the effect of a language partially dead and not in any practical sense for use.[395]

Nicholls's conclusions are clearly drawn from, amongst others, Pater. The alien word is, however, something we find in Dowson's familiar written style if not in his poetry and prose. While "witticisms and couplings of terms which make the reader jump"[396]are abundant in Beardsley's *Under the Hill*, for example, in the synaesthesia of "unwrinkled suavity" and "sumptuous bruises"[397], they are only to be found in Dowson's letters, as in the spoonerism of "a callid porpse"[398].

This can, in part, be accounted for by the nature of Dowson's literary productions. As I have observed elsewhere, the brevity of Dowson's verse in no way corresponds to the idea of decadence as linguistic excess. Moreover, he was very aware of the pitfalls of a *forced* style, remarking to Moore of *Eden*, a novel by Edgar Saltus:

> It is interesting though grotesque: you must read it. It chiefly edifies me in that it strikes me as a *flamboyant* example of the "p. for the r.w" ~~school~~ carried to a ridiculous excess. "Eden listened as were she assisting at the

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394 In Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book*, when Beth embarks upon a literary career she is pitted against decadent artists, "the kind of people whose style is mentioned quite apart from their matter." Instead, "foreign phrases she discarded, and she never attempted to produce an eccentric effect by galvanising obsolete words, rightly discarded for lack of vitality, into a ghastly semblance of life" (1897; Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994) 423. This construction suggests that Grand had read Pater's essay on "Style".

395 Peter Nicholls, *Modernism: A Literary Guide* (London: Macmillan, 1995) 59.

396 Paul Bourget quoted in Peter Nicholls, *Modernism: A Literary Guide* (London: Macmillan, 1995) 59. See also Havelock Ellis "A Note on Paul Bourget," *Views and Reviews: A Selection of Uncollected Articles 1884-1932* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932) for Bourget's definition of Decadence, "The unity of the book is decomposed to give place to the independence of the page, in which the page is decomposed to give place to the independence of the phrase, in which the phrase is decomposed to give place to the independence of the word" 52.

397 Aubrey Beardsley, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser or "Under The Hill"*, (1907; London: St Martin's Press Inc.-Academy Editions, 1974) 26. See also Linda Dowling, "*Venus and Tannhäuser*: Beardsley's Satire of Decadence," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 7-8 (1977-8): 26-41.

398 *Letters* 108.

> soliloquy of an engastritruth." ... And mind you it is not by any means intended as burlesque: it's serious.[399]

Though Plarr recalls that Dowson liked to give the impression that he "pondered the *mot juste* for hours",[400]we know that he did not.[401] Nicholls continues:

> The relational economy of classical prose has broken down and in place of the intersubjective 'web' of a social language we now have neologism and eccentricities which bespeak the loss of any shared horizon.[402]

Whibley had observed in 1899 that:

> The real trouble of literature is that it is forced to address itself to an audience. But surely there is no such necessity. The writer knows no audience save his own approval and recognises the competence of no other critic than himself. When a man awakes to the thought that the public is a vile patron, truly it is a stern passage for his soul. But at this passage, political economy, not literature, perplexes him. He fears not for his fame, but for his bread ... To consider an audience would be a derogation of dignity, even it were possible.[403]

Dowson, as I have shown earlier, not only disliked the reading public but was unsure about the efficacy of language in general ("Words are so weak / When love hath been so strong", from "A Valediction"). It is certainly true that the "shared horizon" is

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[399] *Letters* 69. Flower footnotes "p. for the r.w." as "passion for the right word". An earlier note on Saltus reads, "Edgar Everton Saltus (1855-1921) wrote studies of Balzac and Schopenhauer, historical chronicles and "spicy novels of murder and adultery."" "Engastritruth" is presumably a deviant form of "engastrimyth", meaning "one who appears to speak in the belly, a ventriloquist." *Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed. 1989. "Engastritruth" can probably be taken to mean "one who really speaks from the stomach", though "engastrimyth" and "engastritruth" are equally meaningless in this context.

[400] Quoted in Longaker 130.

[401] Dowson's awareness of laboured exoticism in literature is demonstrated in his novel *Adrian Rome* (London: Methuen and Co., 1899) 274:

> "It comes out twice in thirteen months, the edition is strictly limited, and each copy costs a hundred francs."
> "Why francs?" queried Dalrymple Green.
> "It gives it an exotic touch," explained the proprietor complacently.

[402] Peter Nicholls, *Modernism: A Literary Guide* (London: Macmillan, 1995) 59.

[403] Charles Whibley, "Language and Style," *Fortnightly Review* 71 Jan. 1899: 106. Dowson knew Whibley, who was also Whistler's brother-in-law, personally and wrote to Smithers in 1897, "I have only seen Aubrey [Beardsley] twice. I gather he is rather *lié* with Whibley whom I greatly dislike and do not wish to meet", *Letters* 397. This can probably be accounted for because "Charles Whibley had Ernest Dowson put out of a café on the Boulevards because Dowson took him to task about his attitude to Wilde". Vincent O'Sullivan, *Aspects of Wilde* (London: Constable and Co., 1936) 189.

called into question, though in Dowson's case equally true that his "neologisms and eccentricities" bespeak a particular exclusive world inhabited by Dowson and his intimate friends.

It is a much-discussed fact that many writers of the nineties wrote with little sense of an audience such as Tennyson enjoyed. Indeed, as Yeats observed of his "Companions of the Cheshire Cheese" in "The Grey Rock", they "never made a poorer song / That [they] might have a heavier purse" since individuality was more important than a wide audience or commercial success. As Nicholls observes, "A decadent literature sequesters the reader from a shared reality ... and the high artifice of the style deepens that divide between spoken and written language which Mallarmé had opened".[404] Poets of the nineties did not love their "public" as is evinced in one of Dowson's most entertaining letters:

> what can you expect of a nation which reads the "Blot on the Escutcheon" and boycots Bourget. It makes me despair of England ... And when the literature is so fatuous it's not surprising that the people make one vomit ... And the best -- or the worst of it is that these fulsome idiots with whom one has to brush shoulders don't understand one's language. They can stamp on your toes with their great ~~infamous~~ hoofs but you can't retaliate because their density is so great that they can't conceive such a possibility as your disagreeing with them -- in toto -- I can't say as I should like to -- "My dear Jones, with your twins, and your smug complacency, & your beastly respectability, and your narrow vile mediocrity, you can cease talking to me, and worse still taking it for granted that I agree with you -- because I *don't.* Roundly speaking I loathe you: personally I detest you, but infinitely more I detest what you represent ... " ... I can't say this in the first place because it would not lead to business and secondly because the animal would not understand. He would simply put me down in his gross apology for a mind as a lunatic.[405]

Though he hated "the mob" and much of his work certainly excludes the reader from a "shared reality",[406] I would suggest that Dowson's letters actually bridge the gap between the written and the spoken. In his letters to Moore, we see an intimacy

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[404] Peter Nicholls, *Modernism: A Literary Guide* (London: Macmillan, 1995) 59.
[405] *Letters* 97-8.

which surely reflects their conversational manner, as well as attempts at phonetic transcription, (such as "an'you will"[407]), which undoubtedly link written and spoken language.

Dowson's sentiments are interesting on a number of levels -- most notably, in his comment that "these fulsome idiots ... don't understand one's language". Nowhere does Dowson make his distrust of language, one medium of expression open to humans, more explicit. Moreover, he is setting up a hierarchy in which his opinions and sentiments, and indeed his language (and implicitly those of Moore, his reader), are placed above that of the general public. Specifically, he objects to the assumptions made, and expressed both through the spoken and the unspoken "language" of "the people". Finally, he recognises that in the family business of dry-docking he is constrained by material considerations: precisely the considerations which Whibley had identified as constraining the artist. Nicholls is only partially correct, then, in designating the decadent style as:

> above all, excessive, always obsessed with local effect. It is in Gautier's memorable phrase "worked for all it is worth," but the refinement of effect also produces a deliberate impurity of tone.[408]

Undoubtedly, (particularly in poetry, given the nature of the medium), words and phrases are "worked for all they are worth". However, in Dowson's case, the perceived "impurity of tone" only characterises his letters. Dowson's letters should be seen as a valuable contribution to his literary output, and I would argue that what may appear to be an "impurity of tone" when compared with earlier Victorian literature, in Dowson's case, becomes a coherent and idiosyncratic style.

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406 This solipsism has the effect, at times, of making Dowson appear more of a spectator than a participant in his poetry.
407 *Letters* 76.
408 Peter Nicholls, *Modernism: A Literary Guide* (London: Macmillan, 1995) 59.

Chapter 7:

Dowson as translator

Dowson's translations of Verlaine's poems, collected under the title "After Paul Verlaine", are unusual in two ways: they largely retain Verlaine's general sense (and often highly specific in detail) and also that they rhyme. The difference between a translation, a version, and an imitation must lie in the degree to which the "secondary" writer imports his own secondary material. It is, perhaps, worth drawing the distinction between a translation which concentrates solely on sense -- that is, a general sense -- and a translation which attempts, as far as possible, to match the source text as nearly as possible word for word:

> The translator proper is content to render the original author's interpretation of a theme accessible to a different audience. The writer of versions basically keeps the substance of the source text, but changes its form. The writer of imitations produces, to all intents and purposes, a poem of his own, which has only the title and point of departure ... in common with the source text.[409]

While Dowson's title for the four "After Paul Verlaine" poems suggests that they are "imitations", as defined above by André Lefevere, in formal terms they are also, as I shall show, translations of Verlaine's poems.

Lefevere, in *Translating Poetry: Seven Strategies and a Blueprint,* identifies several problems which may arise for the translator who wishes, as Dowson does, to rhyme, including having to settle for a poor rhyme or to fall back on archaisms. If we consider the first of the "After Paul Verlaine" sequence, a translation of a poem from *Romances sans Paroles* (1874), it is clear that Dowson has kept very closely to Verlaine's sense as well as adhering to an *abaa* rhyme in accordance with the source text:

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[409] André Lefevere, *Translating Poetry: Seven Strategies and a Blueprint* (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Van Gorcom & Co., 1975) 76. Henceforth Lefevere.

AFTER PAUL VERLAINE

I

Il pleut doucement sur la ville. (ARTHUR RIMBAUD)	*Il pleut doucement sur la ville.* RIMBAUD
Il pleure dans mon cœur Comme il pleut sur la ville, Quelle est cette langueur Qui pénètre mon cœur?	Tears fall within mine heart, As rain upon the town: Whence does this languor start, Possessing all mine heart?
O bruit doux de la pluie Par terre et sur les toits! Pour un cœur qui s'ennuie O le chant de la pluie!	O sweet fall of the rain Upon the earth and roofs! Unto an heart in pain, O music of the rain!
Il pleure sans raison Dans ce cœur qui s'écœure. Quoi! nulle trahison? Ce deuil est sans raison.	Tears that have no reason Fall in my sorry heart: What! there was no treason? This grief hath no reason.
C'est bien la pire peine De ne savoir pourquoi, Sans amour sans haine, Mon cœur a tant de peine!	Nay! the more desolate, Because, I know not why, (Neither for love nor hate) Mine heart is desolate.

The rime riche of lines one and four of each stanza is maintained by Dowson, ("O sweet fall of the rain ... O music of the rain!" "O bruit doux de la pluie ... O chant de la pluie!"). Yet none of the rhymes seems strained: "heart" and "start", and "desolate", and "hate". On a literal level, we can see how Dowson has taken the most usual translation of "cœur", "heart", and managed to achieve the rhyme pattern as in the original, "cœur", "langueur", and "cœur", are replaced by "heart", "start", and "heart", though arguably, the translation is rather free in order to achieve the rhyme.

In poetry, an individual word has great importance within the structure, imposing huge restrictions upon the translator of verse. Lefevere also suggests that the translator who wishes to rhyme may fall back on archaisms simply to achieve the rhyme:

> since the literal translator must ... find a sense equivalent for a word in the source language, and [where] no such equivalent appears to be available in the current usage of the target language, he is driven back to an earlier stage in the evolution of that language. Hence the very obvious use of archaisms in literal translation.[410]

This is, of course, a charge to which Dowson, as translator, is potentially open until we consider the main body of his poetry and note his fondness for precisely the type of archaic language which we find in his translations. In the poem which begins "O Mors", for example, the language is not dissimilar:

> Give over playing,
> Cast thy viol away:
> Merely laying
> Thine head my way:
> Prithee, give over playing,
> Grave or gay.

It is not sufficient, therefore, to attribute Dowson's archaic language in his English versions of Verlaine's poetry to the limitations of literal translation. Longaker describes Dowson's "student idolatry"[411] of Verlaine while he was at Oxford and undoubtedly Dowson's poetry was informed from the first by French symbolist poetry. Symons invited Verlaine to London to lecture at Barnard's Inn in High Holborn in November 1893. Dowson, "Thinking of his own apostleship ... called the Rhymers Verlaine's disciples",[412] and indeed the lecture was attended by all the members of The Rhymers' Club.

It is interesting here to compare Dowson's translation with that in Verlaine's *Selected Poems*,[413] edited and translated by Joanna Richardson:

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410 Lefevere 28.
411 Longaker 130.
412 Longaker 88.
413 Paul Verlaine, *Selected Poems*, ed. and trans., Joanna Richardson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) 109.

'Tears fall in my heart . . .'

Rain falls softly on the town.
ARTHUR RIMBAUD

Tears fall in my heart
As rain falls on the town;
What weakness, what hurt
Does so enter my heart?

Oh soft sound of the rain
On the roofs, on the earth!
For a heart that knows pain,
Oh the song of the rain!

Tears fall without cause
In this heart ill at ease.
No betrayal, no loss? ...
This grief has no cause

And it is the worst pain
That I cannot tell why,
Without love, without bane,
My heart feels such pain!

However, an alternative translation[414] gives us an insight into what Dowson has contributed in his versions of Verlaine's poems.

If we consider the two translations of the phrase "Ce deuil est sans raison", it is interesting to note that the translators have rendered the phrase "This grief hath no reason" and "This grief has no cause". Both have chosen to paraphrase the word "sans", preferring the arguably stronger negative of "no reason" and "no cause" to

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414 It is interesting to look at a "plain prose translation", like the one in Anthony Hartley, ed. and trans., *The Penguin Book of French Verse 3: The Nineteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957) 217:

There is weeping in my heart as it rains on the town.
What languour is this that pierces my heart?

O gentle noise of the rain on the ground and the roofs!
For a heart that is troubled, O song of the rain!

There is no cause for weeping in this sickened heart.
What! No treason? This sorrow has no cause.

Indeed, it is the worst grief not to know why,
Without love or hate, my heart has so much grief.

"without reason", or "without cause" -- Dowson choosing the construction which suggests an explanation for the grief, whilst Richardson has opted for a formulation which stresses its origins. Dowson's choice was probably governed by metrical considerations. He has also used the deliberately archaic "hath" -- an anachronism which can be found in much of his own poetry.

Similarly, we can see Dowson's poetic contribution to the translations in lines such as "Nay! the more desolate, / Because, I know not why" where he has neglected "la pire peine" ("the worst affliction / sorrow") in favour of "the more desolate", where Richardson has chosen "the worst pain". Dowson moves away from the poignancy of suffering an acute pain and supplants it with an abstract, intangible feeling of desolation. Richardson has opted for a more literal translation of "it is the worst pain / That I cannot tell why" (even more accurate, perhaps, would be "it is *indeed* the worst grief not to know why"). Dowson has also moderated the language of stanza two where "Dans ce cœur qui s'écœure" becomes not a "disgusted" or "sickened" (or even a "troubled") heart, but simply a "sorry" one. Dowson's translation, then, has his keynote of languour as well as an abstract quality which characterises the main body of his poetry.

Consequently, Dowson's translations of Verlaine's poetry do not immediately stand out as translations, since they also explore many of the same ideas as his own poetry and use the same fixed verse forms. The second of the "After Paul Verlaine" sequence is a translation of "Colloque Sentimental" from *Fêtes Galantes* (1869):

> Dans le vieux parc solitaire et glacé,
> Deux formes ont tout à l'heure passé.
>
> Leurs yeux sont morts et leurs lèvres sont molles,
> Et l'on entend à peine leurs paroles.
>
> Dans le vieux parc solitaire et glacé,
> Deux spectres ont évoqué le passé.

Obviously, the translator has only produced a sense translation for the purposes of edifying the reader of French verse.

-- Te souvient-il de notre extase ancienne?
-- Pourquoi voulez-vous donc qu'il me'en souvienne?

--Ton cœur bat-il toujours à mon seul nom?
Toujours vois-tu mon âme en rêve? -- Non.

-- Ah! les beaux jours de bonheur indicible
Où nous joignions nos bouches! -- C'est possible.

--Qu'il était bleu, le ciel, et grand, l'espoir!
--L'espoir a fui, vaincu, vers le ciel noir.

Tels ils marchaient dans les avoines folles,
Et la nuit seule entendit leurs paroles.

AFTER PAUL VERLAINE

II

Colloque Sentimental

Into the lonely park all frozen fast,
Awhile ago there were two forms who passed.

Lo, are their lips fallen and their eyes dead,
Hardly shall a man hear the words they said.

Into the lonely park, all frozen fast,
There came two shadows who recall the past.

"Dost thou remember our old ecstasy?" --
"Wherefore should I possess that memory?" --

"Doth thine heart beat at my sole name alway?
Still dost thou see my soul in visions?" "Nay!" --

"They were fair days of joy unspeakable,
Whereon our lips were joined?" -- "I cannot tell." --

"Were not the heavens blue, was not hope high?" --
"Hope has fled vanquished down the darkling sky." --

So through the barren oats they wandered,
And the night only heard the words they said.

Again, Dowson has preserved the sense of the source text, but there is more omission and transposition of words than in the former poem. The park, in Verlaine's "Colloque Sentimental", is not only "lonely" and "frozen" but also "old" ("vieux").

It is possible that Dowson has omitted this word to facilitate the rhyme. With minimal loss of meaning, he chooses to concentrate on the glacial aspect of the park which, in his interpretation, is "frozen fast". *The Penguin Book of French Verse* also includes a translation of this poem:

> Their eyes are dead and their lips are slack, and their words can hardly be heard.
> In the old, solitary, frosty park two ghosts recalled the past.[415]

The translator, Hartley, has chosen simply "frosty" to describe the park. This, I suggest, is the state which precedes that of being "frozen fast". The notion of the park itself is also interesting, since the lovers wander "dans les avoines folles", translated by Dowson as "barren oats" and by Hartley as "oat-grass". Each version, then, suggests an alternative interpretation, but it is clear that the setting is not a municipal but a country park. I would suggest that where Hartley has opted for a literal translation of "oat-grass", Dowson and Verlaine are using the term to suggest a more abstract idea of "[wild] oats" to signify lost or wasted youth.

Richardson's translation specifies "wild oats", but she imports an entirely new concept of "snow" into the park:

> Sentimental Conversation
>
> In the old lonely park, across the snow,
> Two figures passed a little while ago.
>
> Their eyes were lifeless and their lips were dead,
> And one could hardly hear the words they said.
>
> In the old lonely park, across the snow,
> Two ghosts recalled the days of long ago.
>
> 'Do you remember our old ecstasy?'
> 'Why do you think it should occur to me?'
>
> 'Love, does your heart still beat my name to know?
> Do you still dream about my spirit?' 'No.'

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[415] Anthony Hartley, ed. and trans., *The Penguin Book of French Verse 3: The Nineteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957) 216.

'Oh the fine days of wordless ecstasy
When we kissed one another!' 'Possibly.'

'How blue the heavens were, how hopes ran high!'
'Hope fled, defeated, to a sombre sky.'

And so, through the wild oats, they walked ahead,
And only darkness heard the words they said.[416]

Use of the word "snow" facilitates the rhyme with "No" and "ago" but eliminates much of the "frostiness" which exists between the former lovers.[417] We can also see, in Dowson's translation, that the first line of stanza two reverses the order in which the "fallen" lips and "dead" eyes are presented, as indeed it reverses the verb. "Leurs yeux sont morts et leurs lèvres sont molles", becomes "Lo, are their lips fallen and their eyes dead". Though we now have the slightly awkward archaism "Lo," Dowson has actually considerably changed the sense of the word "molles", literally meaning "slack" or "flabby", to "fallen". The result of this is that it creates a pleasing eye rhyme with the word "all" between the first three stanzas, and is, perhaps, a term which is less "fleshly". Again, it is an alternative interpretation of sense on the part of the translator.

Clearly it would be impossible to find a precise equivalent for each word in the language, so it is never possible to achieve a completely literal interpretation. Additionally, it is widely held that French has a much smaller vocabulary than English, so the translator from French to English may have a greater word choice. If we hypothesise that greater word choice results in greater specificity, then the translation into English should appear less abstract than the source text. However, in his translations, despite the freedom of word choice afforded him by the English

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[416] Paul Verlaine, *Selected Poems*, ed. and trans., Joanna Richardson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) 79.

[417] Dowson's translation of "les beaux jours de bonheur indicible" as "fair days of joy unspeakable" -- one of Dowson's favourite motifs -- is altered by Richardson into a "wordless ecstasy". In Dowson's version it is the "joy" of times gone by that the speaker is unable to put into words, while in Richardson's interpretation the days themselves were ones of "wordless ecstasy".

language, Dowson still manages to realise the abstract, "impressionistic" qualities of Verlaine's poetry and indeed of his own as in "Into the lonely park, all frozen fast, / There came two shadows who recall the past".[418]

Lefevere explores the idea that the translator is able only to approximate sense equivalence, so that a literal translation must always, in part, distort the sense:

> The search for a sense equivalence very often leads literal translators to disregard the communicative value of a certain word in the source language altogether. This practice necessarily narrows down the total "meaning" of the word in the target text, and can be not only misleading, but also detrimental to the structure of the source text as a whole.[419]

This is, perhaps, the case with Dowson's translation of "molles" and "folles" in "Colloque Sentimental", though distortion of the structure of the text as a whole is questionable. While exact "meaning" may, as Lefevere suggests, be reduced, the reverse may also be true: that the translator has selected the most resonant word in the second language.

Similarly, the meaning is not wholly preserved in the following line, "Et l'on entend à peine leurs paroles". Dowson's version, "Hardly shall a man hear the words they said" entirely omits the notion of the "peine" ("sorrow") of the conversation. (It is, of course, possible that there is a play on the word "hardly" which points up the "frostiness" of their conversation.) The translator who imposes metrical and rhyming restrictions upon his translation may be required to make such omissions. How far we can consider this a defect, a necessity, or a deliberate attempt to "improve" upon the source text is surely a matter of context and of individual judgement.

Interestingly, Dowson seems torn between French literary conventions for representing conversation and those of English. He represents the disembodied

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[418] It is interesting that Dowson changes the tense from the perfect to the present which removes some of the stasis effected by Verlaine's choice of tense.

conversation of the couple within the verse form using both quotation marks and the dashes which, in French convention, characterise dialogue. Dowson's revisions of his verse are usually minimal and centre largely on punctuation, in many cases relaxing his original choices. "Colloque Sentimental" follows this pattern, substituting exclamation marks for question marks in lines twelve and thirteen (thus "Où nous joignions nos bouches! -- C'est possible" becomes ""Whereon our lips were joined? I cannot tell" --"), and, for the reader, this has the effect of removing some of the intensity of Verlaine's original poem and emphasising the coldness of their relations.

The next poem in the "After Paul Verlaine" sequence is Dowson's translation of "Spleen" from *Romances sans Paroles* (1874). Dated February 1892, it appeared for the first time in *Decorations*:

AFTER PAUL VERLAINE

III

SPLEEN	SPLEEN
Les roses étaient toutes rouges, *(a)*	Around were all the roses red, *(a)*
Et les lierres étaient tout noirs. *(b)*	The ivy all around was black. *(b)*
Chère, pour peu que tu te bouges,*(a)*	Dear, so thou only move thine head, *(a)*
Renaissent tous mes désespoirs. *(b)*	Shall all mine old despairs awake! *(b)*
Le ciel étaient trop bleu, trop tendre, *(c)*	Too blue, too tender was the sky, *(c)*
La mer trop verte et l'air trop doux. *(d)*	The air too soft, too green the sea. *(d)*
Je crains toujours, -- ce qu'est d'attendre *(c)*	Always I fear, I know not why, *(c)*
Quelque fuite atroce de vous. *(d)*	Some lamentable flight from thee. *(d)*
Du houx à la feuille vernie *(e)*	I am so tired of holly-sprays *(e)*
Et du luisant buis je suis las,*(f)*	And weary of the bright box-tree *(d)*
Et de la campagne infinie *(e)*	Of all the endless country-ways; *(e)*
Et du tout, fors de vous, hélas! *(f)*	Of everything alas! save thee. *(d)*

[419] Lefevere 29.

By comparing the two poems we can see that where Verlaine's rhyme progresses after two couplets, Dowson's translation follows an alternative rhyme-scheme. The rhyme-scheme which Dowson imposes on his version of "Spleen" is more complex than that of the source text. While Verlaine uses a regular rhyme-scheme which runs *ababcdcdefef*, Dowson constructs his as *ababcdcdeded* -- with the slightly jarring rhyme of "black" with "awake". Dowson's scheme creates a greater continuity within the poem whilst also being backward-looking, with the rhyme between lines six and eight, "sea" and "thee", picked up again in the penultimate and final couplet, "box-tree" and "thee". Moreover, repetition of the word "thee" in lines eight and twelve (rime riche) consolidates the backward-looking effect in relying on a word which has been used earlier to create the rhyme.

If we examine the third stanza, it is clear that Dowson has again reversed the order in which he presents the "green sea" and the "soft air". ("La mer trop verte et l'air trop doux" becomes "The air too soft, too green the sea"). He has inverted the order of the sea and the air and, in so doing, he has achieved the backward-looking rhyme which I have identified in lines six, eight, ten, and twelve, as well as created a balanced line which retains the ethereal quality of Verlaine's poem. Moreover, by privileging the air over the sky, Dowson creates a natural ordering of sky, air, and sea. The anomalous rhyme in Dowson's "Spleen" is that of "awake" with "black" -- clearly the nearest match, in sense terms, for Verlaine's "Renaissant," literally meaning " are reborn" or "are revived". "Spleen" is particularly interesting if we consider the changes effected by Dowson's choice of words in lines such as "Some lamentable flight from thee". Verlaine's original, "Quelque fuite atroce de vous"[420] -- literally, "some agonising / atrocious flight from you" -- is greatly toned down in Dowson's version, becoming only a "lamentable" flight. Dowson has substituted the

[420] In Verlaine's original poem there is a curious mix of the use of "tu" and "vous".

informal, and archaic, "thee" for the more formal "vous". Both these deviations from a formal, "word-for-word" translation make the line appear to be as much Dowson's poetic creation as it is Verlaine's.

Dowson's rhyme scheme is achieved by the transposition of various elements of the source text. Similarly, the literal translation of stanza five, if we keep to word order, would be something like, "Of the holly with its varnished leaves / And of the bright box-tree, I am weary". A literal translation such as this one highlights the restrictions which Dowson, as translator, has imposed upon himself. He has limited himself, in this poem, by creating a sense translation which also rhymes. Dowson's own interpretation of stanza five, "I am so tired of holly-sprays / And weary of the bright box tree", transposes the order of words -- syntactic distortions being inevitable between languages -- omits words (such as "vernie"), and adds other words (such as "weary") where the source text may have only one ("las").

Dowson has also effected more substitutions than omissions in this poem, though omissions have largely characterised the other translations. "Chère, pour peu que tu te bouges, / Renaissant tous mes désespoirs". Here Dowson has inserted the word "head" into the third stanza, undoubtedly to create a rhyme with "red". As I have observed earlier, the head appears frequently in Dowson's own verse, being a point of focus on both his body and that of his mistress.

John Gray included a translation of the same poem in *Silverpoints* (1893):

SPLEEN[421]

The roses every one were red,
And all the ivy leaves were black.

Sweet, do not even stir your head,
Or all of my despairs come back.

The sky is too blue, too delicate:
Too soft the air, too green the sea.

[421] John Gray, "Spleen," *Poetry of the Nineties*, ed. R. K. R. Thornton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 178.

I fear -- how long had I to wait! --
That you will tear yourself from me.

The shining box-leaves weary me,
The varnished holly's glistening,

The stretch of infinite country;
So, saving you, does everything.

Arguably, Gray's translation of "Spleen" is inferior to Dowson's. In the second stanza, Gray introduces a negative in "do not even stir your head", which is a complete shift from the original French.[422] On the whole, however, Gray's rendering is less faithful and less effective than Dowson's, as evinced in the final couplet where Gray is content to choose the nearest English equivalent (where seeming equivalence may prove false), "The stretch of infinite country; / So, saving you, does everything".

AFTER PAUL VERLAINE

III:6	IV
Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit, Si bleu, si calme! Un arbre, par-dessus le toit, Berce sa palme.	The sky is up above the roof So blue, so soft! A tree there, up above the roof, Swayeth aloft.
La cloche, dans le ciel qu'on voit, Doucement tinte. Un oiseau sur l'arbre qu'on voit Chante sa plainte.	A bell within that sky we see, Chimes low and faint: A bird upon that tree we see, Maketh complaint.
Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, la vie est là, Simple et tranquille. Cette paisible rumeur-là Vient de la ville.	Dear God! is not the life up there, Simple and sweet? How peacefully are borne up there Sounds of the street!
--Qu'as-tu fait, ô toi que voilà, Pleurant sans cesse, Dis, qu'as-tu fait, toi que voilà, De ta jeunesse?	What hast thou done, who comest here, To weep alway? Where hast thou laid, who comest here, Thy youth away?

[422] Stanza four, which in Dowson's translation is probably the weakest, achieves more of the force suggested by "atroce" in Gray's rendering of it as "you will tear yourself from me", and is also more faithful to "ce qu'est d'attendre" with "how long I had to wait".

"After Paul Verlaine IV", a translation of one of Verlaine's poems from *Sagesse* (1881), is the last in the sequence. Dowson has kept to Verlaine's *abab* rhyming quatrains and has, ostensibly, omitted fewer words and made fewer transpositions than in "Spleen". Clearly there are some omissions, such as the second "mon Dieu" in the penultimate stanza, as well as changes of meaning, such as the change of "calme" (the literal translation being "calm") to "soft". Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the final "After Paul Verlaine" translation is the introduction of the negative in stanza three. "Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, la vie est là, / Simple et tranquille" is altered to "Dear God! Is not the life up there, / Simple and sweet?" Chardin suggests that though the introduction of the negative interrogation may appear to be a defect in Dowson's reading of the source text, it is, in fact, a conscious and deliberate measure to distance the translation from Verlaine's original:

> Dans le troisième strophe, l'interro-négative se substituant à la forme affirmative du texte de départ nous apparaît mois comme une lecture fautive de la part de Dowson, qui avait du français une connaissance suffisante pour traduire des textes plus ardues que ce poème, que comme une démarcation consciente, voulue, délibérée et réfléchie par rapport au texte d'originie.[423]

Dowson's command of French was, as Chardin observes, certainly good enough to allow him to translate texts far more demanding than "Le ciel est par-dessus le toit", so his modification of the sense of the poem cannot be attributed to a misreading. Though there may be other considerations, such as metrical correspondence between the translation and the original poem, Chardin's point is probably a valid one. Dowson's poetic contribution, reflected in the title of the "After Paul Verlaine" sequence, becomes more explicit if we consider Chardin's further observation that:

> "Le ciel est par-dessus le toit" est l'envers poètique de "Chanson sans Paroles" ou "Beata Solitudo." L'extase a disparu et dans l'interrogation sans réponse des derniers vers perce et grandit une uncontrôlable angoisse.[424]

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[423] Chardin 264-5.
[424] Chardin 265.

"Chanson sans Paroles" is a title highly reminiscent of Verlaine -- a sort of combination of *La Bonne Chanson* (1870) and *Romances sans Paroles* (1871):

In the deep violet air,
  Not a leaf is stirred;
  There is no sound heard,
But afar, the rare
  Trilled voice of a bird.

Is the wood's dim heart,
  And the fragrant pine,
  Incense, and a shrine
Of her coming? Apart,
  I wait for a sign.

What the sudden hush said,
  She will hear, and forsake,
  Swift, for my sake,
Her green, grassy bed:
  She will hear and awake!

She will hearken and glide,
  From her place of deep rest,
  Dove-eyed, with the breast
Of a dove, to my side:
  The pines bow their crest.

I wait for a sign:
  The leaves to be waved,
  The tall tree-tops laved
In a flood of sunshine,
  This world to be saved!

In the deep violet air,
  Not a leaf is stirred;
  There is no sound heard,
But afar, the rare
  Trilled voice of a bird.

It is not clear why the closing stanza is italicised -- though it appears as the last poem in *Verses* and may be Dowson's leave-taking. It is certainly true, as Chardin suggests, that the questions which receive no response turn the sense of the "old ecstasy" into a sense of anguish. Flower, in his *The Poetical Works of Ernest*

Dowson, notes the similarity between "Chanson sans Paroles" and the first of Verlaine's *Romances sans Paroles*:

> C'est l'extase langoureuse,
> C'est la fatigue amoureuse,
> C'est tous les frissons des bois
> Parmi l'étreinte des brises,
> C'est, vers les ramures grises,
> Le chœur des petites voix.

I have quoted only the first stanza, which is arguably reminiscent of Dowson's poem. However, I would suggest that it is more helpful to look at the wider, and less tangible, influence of Verlaine's poetry upon Dowson.[425] There are certainly some motifs which appear in both poems, such as the breeze and its effect on the trees, but what Dowson takes from Verlaine in "Chanson sans Paroles", the "After Paul Verlaine" sequence, and much of his other poetry is a form of poetic "impressionism" demonstrated in phrases such as "the deep violet air" or the synaesthetic "a flood of sunshine".

Critical reception of Dowson's "After Paul Verlaine" translations has largely been favourable, praising the translations as, for example, "almost as beautiful as the original[s]",[426] and recognising that Verlaine's poetry had a wider influence on Dowson's poetry. Wendell V. Harris has specified further that "Saint Germain-en Laye" stands as evidence of Dowson's debt to Verlaine:

> The situation which carries the poem's theme ["Saint Germain-en-Laye"] was apparently suggested by Verlaine's "Colloque Sentimental," ... In his translation, Dowson follows rather loosely the mood and movement of the original in which two spectral forms recall their past love, the first dwelling on their "extase ancienne," the second replying that "L'espoir a fui, vainçu, vers le ciel noir." In "Saint Germain," Dowson has shifted the theme so that the contrast and the tension in the poem lie very little between past and present ...

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[425] It is interesting to note that W. R. Thomas, one of Dowson's friends at Oxford, felt that, "It is worth emphasising that Dowson's attitude towards a writer, whether English or French, was based rather on matter than style". "Ernest Dowson at Oxford," *The Nineteenth Century* Apr. 1928: 564.
[426] Forrest Reid, "Ernest Christopher Dowson," *Monthly Review* 19 (1905): 111.

> Here the tension exists not between the "white / Gaunt ghosts" but within the poet's vision of disillusionment, in which the memory of his pursuit of the laughing maid has come to be represented by an image which is the ghost of himself.[427]

Perhaps significantly, "Saint Germain-en-Laye" is printed just before the sequence of "After Paul Verlaine" poems of which "Colloque Sentimental" is the second. While it is interesting to draw such parallels, it is important to note that references to "poor worn" and "gaunt" ghosts recur frequently in Dowson's poetry. Verlaine may, as Forrest Reid claims, be Dowson's "real master", but "resemblance to his master is always an effect of perfect sympathy, never one of conscious imitation".[428]

Dowson was not the only figure of the nineties to attempt to translate Verlaine. Symons translated "Pantomime", "L'Allée", "Fantoches", and "Mandoline"[429] from Verlaine's *Fêtes Galantes* (1867):

> Mandoline
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | Les donneurs de sérénades | The singers of serenades |
> | Et les belles écouteuses | Whisper their faded vows |
> | Échangent des propos fades | Unto fair listening maids |
> | Sous les ramures chanteuses. | Under the singing boughs. |
> | | |
> | C'est Tircis et c'est Aminte, | Tircis, Aminte, are there |
> | Et c'est l'éternal Clitandre, | Clitandre has waited long, |
> | Et c'est Damis qui pour mainte | And Damis for many a fair |
> | Cruelle fait maint vers tendre. | Tyrant makes many a song. |
> | | |
> | Leurs courtes vestes de soie, | Their short vests, silken and bright, |
> | Leurs longues robes à queues, | Their long pale silken trains, |
> | Leur élégance, leur joie | Their elegance of delight, |
> | Et leurs molles ombres bleues | Twine soft blue silken chains. |
> | | |
> | Tourbillonnent dans l'extase | And the mandolines and they, |
> | D'une lune rose et grise, | Faintlier breathing, swoon |
> | Et la mandoline jase | Into the rose and grey |
> | Parmi les frissons de brise. | Ecstasy of the moon. |

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427 Wendell V. Harris, "Innocent Decadence: The Poetry of *The Savoy*," *PMLA* 77 (1962): 633. Some of Dowson's closest friends, such as Victor Plarr, were to suggest that the example "of Verlaine's mode of life" led Dowson to a similar "renouncement of conventional Victorian ideals", Longaker 182-3. But, as Longaker concludes, though "the squalor and misery in which Dowson found the Master [in Paris] ... heightened rather than lessened his admiration", he "scarcely needed the example of Verlaine's " to construct his own life, Longaker 182.

428 Forrest Reid, "Ernest Christopher Dowson," *Monthly Review* 19 (1905): 111.

429 The first volume of *The Savoy* included a wood engraving of the same name by Charles Conder.

It is clear, even from a first reading, that he though has retained the rhyme-scheme of *abab*, he has been less faithful than Dowson to Verlaine's original text. While the translation is competent, Dowson has succeeded (where Symons has failed) in rendering Verlaine's abstract and illusory impressions, as he does with "La cloche, dans le ciel qu'on voit, / Doucement tinte" and "A bell within that sky we see, / Chimes low and faint":

> The sharp undercutting of romanticism which provides the tension of Verlaine's poem disappears in the Symons version ... Symons misses such implications of the evanescence and illusion of the moment's intoxication. Moreover, his mandolines are sentimental enough to breathe and "swoon"; Verlaine's instruments simply chatter ("jase"). Only the phrase "faded vows," a mellowed echo of Verlaine's "propos fades," disturbs the idyllic surface of Symons's rendering. (The 1902 collected edition of his poems, which Symons himself edited, prints "fated vows" and thus removes all trace of irony.)[430]

Dowson's translations of Verlaine have always been rated highly, both as translations and for their own merit. An anonymous review of Dowson's work in 1969 claimed that:

> Dowson's translations of Verlaine's poetry will stand the test of time ... they retain the dewy freshness and iridescence of the original lyrics.[431]

In his study of translation, Lefevere concludes that:

> In short, the reason why most translations, versions, and imitations are unsatisfactory renderings of the source text is simply this: they all concentrate exclusively on one aspect of the source text only, rather than on its totality.[432]

Distortion of the source text takes place on various levels, as I have shown, such as sense, structure, and communicative value. Arguably, however, in his translations Dowson has been successful on many fronts and has not concentrated exclusively on any one aspect of the source text.

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430 Wendell V. Harris, "Innocent Decadence: The Poetry of *The Savoy*," *PMLA* 77 (1962): 633.
431 "The Tragic Muse" *Contemporary Review* Feb 1969: 101.

Dowson's translations were not confined to poetry, however. Between 1893 and 1899 he translated a number of novels from the French, either for his publisher, Smithers, or for the Lutetian Society. The purpose of the Lutetian Society[433] was "to translate and publish works which appealed primarily to the erudite and conveyed principles and doctrines that were different from, if not always antagonistic to, Victorian ideals of morality".[434] Their strategy, in the light of Henry Vizetelly's jail sentence[435] and fine for the translation of Zola's *La Terre*, was to issue their volumes at very high prices and therefore limit the sale to the upper classes. In this way the Lutetian Society hoped to avoid the charge of "debas[ing] public morals".[436] Between 1894 and 1895 the Lutetian Society printed twelve volumes for private distribution. These were mostly novels from Zola's collection of twenty novels entitled *Les Rougons Macquart* (1880).

Though Zola's novels had been under ban by the University during Dowson's time at Oxford, they remained some of his favourite works. Dowson's first commission was *La Terre*, the story of rural life which was far from idyllic. It was published in 1894, but, as Longaker records, he found that the business of translating was tedious and that "to wait on inspiration for the translation of a bulky novel was impossible".[437] Victor Plarr translated *Nana* -- the story of the heroine's life of profitable vice -- Symons *L'Assommoir,* possibly the most brutal of Zola's collection, Teixiera de Mattos *La Curée*, and Havelock Ellis the story of the striking miners, *Germinal.*

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[432] Lefevere 99.

[433] I have been unable to trace the origins of the Lutetian Society, but it seems reasonable to conclude that the name derives from "Lutetia", the Latin name given to Paris. It seems probable that the Latin name and its perceived links with the Roman Empire influenced the choice of this name by young translators of the nineties.

[434] Longaker 131.

[435] Dowson was keen to translate Pierre Loüys's *Aphrodite* but, as he observed to Smithers, "I suppose it would mean joining Oscar in his gardening operations in Reading Gaol", *Letters* 362.

[436] Longaker 131.

[437] Longaker 133.

His next translation was *Majesty*, by Louis Marie Anne Couperus, also published in 1894, which was passed on to him by the most prominent member of the Society, Alexander Teixiera de Mattos.

In the spring of 1896 Smithers commissioned him to translate, in verse, Voltaire's *La Pucelle d'Orléans*. Although he was "merely revising an old English translation" by the Countess of Charleville and W. H. Ireland, Dowson disliked both the text and the task, writing to John Gray that "I am editing the most tedious & uncongenial work which I have read".[438] Though Dowson began work in 1896, *La Pucelle d'Orléans* was not published until 1899. Voltaire's *La Pucelle d'Orléans* was Dowson's least favourite commission for Smithers. Longaker records that:

> *La Pucelle*, on which he had started to work as early as the spring of 1896, was not ready for publication until 1899. It was probably in the winter of 1897 that Smithers, irate at the failure of his translator to work, made a hurried visit to Paris "to kill Dowson."[439]

Though his task was merely that of editing two previous translations, he did not, as he assured Smithers, work on the text "like a Trojan".[440]

Canto 1

ARGUMENT

The chaste loves of Charles VII and the Agnes Sorel. Orléans besieged by the English. Apparition of Saint Denis, etc

The praise of Saints my lyre shall not rehearse,
Feeble my voice, and too profane my verse;
Yet shall my muse to land our Joan incline,
Who wrought, 'tis said, such prodigies divine;
Whose virgin hands revived the drooping flower
And gave to Gallia's lily ten-fold power;

438 *Letters* 349.
439 Longaker 226.
440 *Letters* 363.

CHANT PREMIER[441]

Amours honnêtes de Charles VII, et d'Agnes Sorel.
Siège d'Orléans par les Anglais.
Apparition de saint Denis, etc, etc, etc.

Je ne suis né pour célébrer les saints:
Ma voix est faible, et même un peu profane.
Il faut pourtant vous chanter cette Jeanne,
Qui fit, dit-on, des prodiges divins.
Elle affermit de ses pucelles mains
Des fleurs de lys la tige gallicane.

Dowson's final version of the "heroic-comical poem", *La Pucelle*, is more divergent from the original French text than any of his other translations. A pure sense translation of the first line, "je ne suis né pour célébrer les saints, / Ma voix est faible, et même un peu profane", would be something like, "I was not born to celebrate the saints: / My voice is weak, and even a bit profane". Dowson's translation changes the sense of the phrase almost entirely, substituting the imagery of a rehearsing lyre for Voltaire's original idea of being born for a specific purpose. Though Dowson preserves the idea of having "too feeble" a voice with which to praise the saints, it is his verse, rather than his voice, which is "too profane". Similarly, there is no reference to a "ten-fold power" -- simply a strengthening of the lily's stalk.

To suggest that Dowson misread the French is, of course, inappropriate. Yet it is nevertheless intriguing that Dowson has produced a translation which is so markedly different from the original text. It is possible that he has closely adhered to one of the other translations, though it is equally possible that he purposefully changed the sense of some of his translation. Dowson, as we know, was no great lover of Voltaire's work, calling it the "interminable Pucelle", and he may well have chosen to alter the text to make it more to his liking.

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441 Voltaire, *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, ed. Theodore Besterman (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1970) 258.

Dowson's translation of Balzac's *La Fille aux yeux d'or* was published in 1896. As early as 1889 Dowson wrote to Moore that "[Balzac] I am reading systematically & I have discovered that he is really very great."[442] Smithers's edition of *La Fille aux yeux d'or* is notable since it is the only translation to include a preface by Dowson. Dowson told Conal O'Riordan:

> The "Fille Aux Yeux D'or" is now in the printers' hands. I spent and entire night in writing the preface (from midnight -- 8.30AM) & Pierre Louys has allowed it to be dedicated to him as the greatest authority in Europe on Lesbianism except myself. [*sic*][443]

His prose style, in the preface, displays none of the characteristics which are usually associated with his work, such as brevity or simplicity. Instead, his style is tortuous, rambling, and highly artificial, and we may attribute this to Dowson's having worked through the night:

> The work of Balzac justifies, perhaps, more than that of any other novelist, by its great volume, selection, at least for the English reader, and the continuity of that work, the interlacing of character and intrigue, the perpetual overlapping of story and story in the great *ensemble* of the *Comédie Humaine* make such selection of any isolated piece somewhat nugatory, unless it be accompanied by a word of introduction.[444]

The parenthetical clauses, such as "at least for the English reader", structure of sentences, and intensifiers make the preface arduous reading! By writing in this manner, Dowson's moral defence of the story of Paquita, *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, gets lost in the twisted argument. The stories in the *Histoire des Treize*, according to Dowson, are those of:

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442 *Letters* 112.

443 *Letters* 334. Pierre Loüys published *Chansons de Bilitis* in 1894 which claimed to be a translation from the Greek of the verse of a poetess who was contemporary with Sappho. In fact, *Chansons de Bilitis* was a hoax, but a highly successful one.

444 Ernest Dowson, preface, *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, by Honoré de Balzac (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896) v.

> a band of conspirators -- conspirators in good society and in modern Paris, for no cause but their own, for their own ends and pleasures, but conspirators as devoted and unscrupulous as ever strutted on the stage of melodrama. They are chevaliers of the will, of that *volonté* which has so curious a fascination for Balzac, which it always pleased him to deify, and which, from the first to last in each story, in each novel, is exhibited as triumphant, whether it be good or evil, over the contradictory quality, *indefinable*, the lack of will, weakness, be it kindly, vicious, or *involuntary*.[445]

In listing so many qualities, and indeed juxtaposing the words "kindly" and "vicious", the overall sense of what is deified and "triumphant", as well as the nature of "the contradictory quality" is confused. This can be attributed, in part, to Dowson's manner of composition of his preface, but it is also, no doubt, a deliberate ploy to mitigate the (perceived) immorality of the story. The edition, it must be remembered, was commissioned by Smithers and would have sold for a lower price than the publications of the Lutetian Society. It is certainly possible that Dowson's prose style may, in this instance, have been an attempt to gloss over the licentious aspects, and to point up the "romantic power ... [and] subtlety of ... analysis" of the tale.

In 1897, Dowson began a translation of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* by Choderlos de Laclos. On 14 November he wrote to Smithers asking whether a preface was required for the volume. No preface appeared, however, in the final publication, probably because Dowson concluded:

> I have discovered all that there is to be discovered about Choderlos de Laclos but the facts are so meagre that I despair of making an article of them.[446]

If we compare Dowson's translation[447] of Laclos's novel not only with the original French, but also with another translation into English, it is possible to identify some

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445 Ernest Dowson, preface, *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, by Honoré de Balzac (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896) v.

446 *Letters* 359.

447 The 1940 edition of *Dangerous Acquaintances* (London: Nonesuch Press) states on the title page that the novel has been "Englished" by Ernest Dowson. There is also evidence that Dowson consulted

characteristic features of his translation. I have chosen the final letter from Madame de Volanges to Madame de Rosemonde from which to make some comparisons of the prose:

> Le sort de Madame de Merteuil paraît enfin rempli, ma chère et digne amie, et est tel que ses plus grands ennemis sont partagés entre l'indignation qu'elle merite, et la pitié qu'elle inspire.[448]

If we consider Dowson's translation of the opening sentence first, we can see that he has kept quite closely to the French structure:

> The fate of Madame de Merteuil, my dear and revered friend, seems to be at length complete; and it is such that her greatest enemies are divided between the indignation she merits and the pity she inspires.[449] *(Dowson)*

> Madame de Merteuil's destiny seems at last, my dear and worthy friend, to have been fulfilled. It is such that her worst enemies are divided between the indignation she merits and the pity she inspires.[450] *(P. W. K. Stone, Penguin)*

It is immediately obvious that Dowson has kept to the original single sentence where Stone has divided it into two. Dowson has included a semi-colon -- a favourite punctuation mark in his poetry -- which does not provide the same degree of closure afforded by the full-stop. The greatest differences in vocabulary between these two translations lie in the words "greatest" and "worst", and in "worthy" and "revered". In choosing "greatest" and "worst", the translators have opted for words with entirely different meanings, but which have almost the same meaning in the context of "worst" or "greatest" enemies. Dowson's rendering is the most accurate since he

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a modern edition of the text, since he wrote to Henry Davray in May 1897 that, "je voudrais continuer ma traduction des "Liaisons" ... Je crois qu'il doit être une édition moderne à 2. ou 3.50 -- mais vous me direz le prix et je vous enverrai un mandat." *Letters* 383. A review of the volume in the *Times Literary Supplement* 19 July 1941 suggested that the reprint was "intended to cement the Anglo-French alliance"!

448 Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782: Paris: Éditions Gallimard et Librarie Générale Française, 1958) 441.

449 Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, trans Ernest Dowson (1782; London: Nonesuch Press, 1940) 382.

450 Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, trans. P. W. K. Stone (1782; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961) 391.

adheres to the literal meaning of "grands" in the source text. This is an extremely interesting diversion between the translators, and one which appears to be dependent upon collocation. Dowson's translation of "digne" as "revered" is also more accurate than "worthy" which is offered by Stone, for he keeps to the passive sense where Stone renders it as active:

> Qui pourrait ne pas frémir en songeant aux malheurs que peut causer une seule liaison dangereuse? et quelles peines ne s'éviterait-on point en y réfléchissant davantage! Quelle femme ne fuirait pas au premier propos d'un séducteur? Quelle mère pourrait, sans trembler, voir une autre personne qu'elle parler à sa fille? Mais ces réflexions tardives n'arrivent jamais qu'après l'événement; et l'une des plus importantes vérités, comme aussi, peut-être des plus généralement reconnues, reste étouffée et sans usage dans le tourbillon de nos mœurs inconséquentes. [451]
>
> Who is there who would not shudder, if he were to reflect upon the misfortunes that may be caused by even one dangerous acquaintance! And what troubles would one not avert by reflecting on this more often! What woman would not fly before the first proposal of a seducer! What mother could see another person in conversation with her daughter, and trouble not! But these tardy reflexions never come until after the event; and one of the most important of truths, as it is, perhaps, one of the most generally recognised, lies stifled and void of use in the whirlpool of our inconsequent manners. (*Dowson*)
>
> Who would not shudder to think of the misery that may be caused by a single dangerous intimacy? And how much suffering could be avoided if it were more often thought of! What woman would not fly the seducer's first approach? What mother could, without trembling, see anyone but herself in conversation with her daughter? But we never reflect until after the event, when it is too late; and one of the most important of truths, as also, perhaps, one of the most generally acknowledged, is cast aside and forgotten amid the inconsequential bustle of our lives. (*Stone*)[452]

Other differences between the translations, such as the construction of "Who is there who would not shudder" which Stone renders as a simple "Who would not shudder", occur, of course, because Dowson was working at the end of the nineteenth century whilst Stone's translation is from the nineteen-sixties.

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[451] Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782; Paris: Éditions Gallimard et Librarie Générale Française, 1958) 442

[452] Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, trans. P. W. K. Stone (1782; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961) 392.

Dowson has, perhaps, fallen into the trap of taking the most similar words in English to stand for that of the French, as with "réflexions tardives", though in this case they hold almost exactly the same meaning. His "tardy reflexions" demonstrates how closely he has followed the source text. Stone's translation from the nineteen-sixties, "we never reflect", is clearly much simpler than Dowson's version. Interestingly, Dowson has kept to the French, (or what we might see now as American), spelling of "reflexion", which gives his translation a slightly awkward feel to the modern English reader, though the *Oxford English Dictionary* accepted both as good English at the time of Dowson's translation.

Finally, the last sentence quoted above deserves some consideration. Both translators have avoided the potential pitfall of translating "tourbillon" as "turbulence". Stone has opted for the rather prosaic and freer "bustle", whilst Dowson has chosen "whirlpool" -- suggested, along with "whirlwind", by most French dictionaries. Moreover, Dowson has adhered strictly to Laclos's text in rendering "nos mœurs inconséquentes" as "our inconsequent manners" while we can see that Stone has made the word "inconsequent" refer to the "tourbillon" or, in his words, "bustle of our lives".

As I have observed earlier of his letters, in his translations, Dowson produces a hybrid style which is neither totally English nor completely French -- nor, indeed, wholly dependent on the original text. Nevertheless, what he has produced must be considered fine translations because he remains faithful to the spirit of the originals without losing sight of the necessity for a fluent prose style in English. Furthermore, as we have seen, he has achieved sense, metrical, and rhyming translations of Verlaine's poems, while avoiding substantial distortion of the communicative value of the original texts, and has thus produced poems which belong as much to Verlaine as to himself.

Chapter 8:

Dowson in the Twentieth Century

Though he has never been classed as a truly canonical poet, even in our fluctuating canon, Dowson's poetry is often anthologised. The most frequently collected pieces are "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae"[453] and "Vitae summa brevis spem nos incohare longam", sometimes supplemented by "A Valediction" and "Villanelle of the Poet's Road". The central poems, with their lengthy Latin titles,[454] have not only added to the canon, but they contain phrases which have passed into twentieth-century culture to signify a *carpe diem* approach to life: "they are not long, the days of wine and roses," and "gone with the wind". Dowson's phrase "gone with the wind" was, of course, appropriated by Margaret Mitchell for the title of her 1936 novel.[455] The huge circulation of the novel -- fifty thousand copies were sold in a single day -- and the subsequent film have made Dowson's line extremely familiar.

A further epithet which we may attribute, in part, to Dowson is that of "Wine and woman and song" from "Villanelle of the Poet's Road". Though it is often misquoted as "wine, *women* and song", I can find no other record of the phrase, other than a quotation tenuously attributed to Martin Luther, "Wer nicht liebt Wein, Weib und Gesang, / Der bleibt ein Narr sein Leben lang" ("Who loves not woman, wine, and song / Remains a fool his whole life long").[456]

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[453] The 1932 film, *Cynara*, the tale of an adulterous lawyer, takes its title from Dowson's poem.

[454] The quotation is taken from Horace, *Odes*, 4.1.4. For a full discussion of Dowson's use of classical literature see Rowena Fowler, "Ernest Dowson and the Classics," *Yearbook of English Studies* 3 (1973): 243-52, and Ward W. Briggs, "Dowson, Propertius and Cynara," *Classical and Modern Literature: A Quarterly* 8 (1988): 115-23.

[455] Mitchell's orginal title, *Tomorrow is Another Day*, (the last sentence of the novel), was rejected by the publishers on the grounds that there were too many titles containing the word "tomorrow."

[456] "Martin Luther," *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 1981 ed. However, these lines are thought to originate with Johann Heinrich Voss (1751-1826):

> Dir wünsch ich Wein and Mädchenkuß
> Und dienem Klepper Pegasus
> Die Krippe stets voll Futter!
> Wer nicht liebt Wein, Weib und Gesang,
> Der bliebt ein Narr sein Leben lang,
> Sagt Doktor Martin Luther.

Indeed, it may be argued that "wine and woman and song" constituted the world which Dowson inhabited. The "Dowson Legend", perpetrated by Symons, would certainly have the twentieth-century reader believe so. How far we subscribe to "The Dowson Legend" does not, however, diminish its influence for first-time readers of Dowson's poetry. Moreover, it sets Dowson in a definite continuum of poets, including figures like Chatterton and Verlaine, who, it seemed, needed alcohol and a generally dissipated life in order to practise their art:

> Finally, worn out with drugs, disease, under-nourishment and drink, he died, a Keats, a Chatterton, in the arms of Robert Sherard.[457]

Selections of Dowson's work frequently include prefaces such as this one by Huxley:

> History affords us only too many examples of the poets whom life and its diurnal miseries have overwhelmed ... Ernest Dowson is numbered among these.[458]

It is, of course, as Rupert Croft Cooke notes:

> one of the dearest fictions of the western world that poets should die young after lives of broken health, of gross excesses of alcohol, if possible with a *grande passion* thrown in.[459]

The lines were also included in Johann Gottfreid Herder's "Folk Songs" (Leipzig, 1778) 12.
A similar phrase appears in Byron's *Don Juan* (1819-24), Canto 2, clxxviii, as "Let us have wine and women, mirth and laughter / Sermons and soda-water the day after".

In "Overcoming Time and Despair: Ernest Dowson's Villanelle," *Victorian Poetry* 34 (1996): 102, Karen Alkalay-Gut suggests that "wine and woman and song" recalls from Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyát* with the "book of verses ... a loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou":

> Fitzgerald's syntax accentuates the "Thou" far more than the others, diminishing the verses, food, and wine to accessories accentuating the pleasure of the beloved, but Dowson sandwiches the "other" between two equally significant nouns and connects them all with the levelling "and".

But where she concludes that the "wine, poetry, and love form no hierarchy, and lead to no higher pleasure" and privilege the "poet's road" over his "goal", I should wish to argue that the three things, "wine and woman and song", amount to more than simply "garnishes" to an "over long" life and are the basis of that life.

457 Rupert Croft Cooke, *Feasting with Panthers: A New Consideration of Some Late Victorian Writers* (London: W. H. Allen, 1967) 239. This "dearest fiction," of course, is not confined to poets, but applies to artists in general.

458 Aldous Huxley, "Ernest Dowson," *The English Poets* 5, ed. Thomas Humphry Ward (New York: Macmillan, 1918) 601.

Frequent analogies between Dowson and Keats have been drawn, perhaps as a result of Symons's description of Dowson's "sort of Keats-like face, the face of a demoralised Keats."[460] The equation of the physical characteristics of both men is clearly tenuous though, as Longaker records:

> It is possible that the largeness and unnatural brightness of the eyes, as well as the faint similarity which existed between Keats's unrequited love for Fanny Brawne and Dowson's love for Missie, led those who had passing glimpses of Dowson to draw such a comparison.[461]

Dowson and Keats certainly shared unrequited love and an awareness of their own impending death, as is evinced in Keats's letters, "If I had any chance of recovery, this passion would kill me",[462] and Dowson's "The Dying of Francis Donne" and "The Visit":

> all my wonder was gone when I looked again into the eyes of my guest, and I said:
> "I have wanted you all my life."
> Then said Death (and what reproachful tenderness was shadowed in his obscure smile):
> "You had only to call."

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[459] Rupert Croft Cooke, *Feasting with Panthers: A New Consideration of Some Late Victorian Writers* (London: W. H. Allen, 1967) 241. Indeed, it has suited biographers to see unrequited, or only partially reciprocated, love as characteristic of the era. "Even more than the hopeless loves of Yeats or Dowson or A. E. Housman, Wilde's love affair provides an example of beserk passion", Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) 553. Moreover, Dowson's contemporaries, such as Vincent O'Sullivan, have perpetuated the myth:

> Lionel Johnson, whose gods were Pater, Newman and ... the English eighteenth century, disliked Wilde, disliked Symons, disliked, upon a very superficial acquaintance, Baudelaire and Verlaine, and summed all that up by saying "I don't like madmen" yet his life was as mad as that of the most decadent French or English poet, madder even than Ernest Dowson's; for Dowson did pursue what seemed to him pleasant among the other drifting fragments of humanity, whereas Johnson's was a morose and uncomforted joy.

Vincent O'Sullivan, *Opinions* (London: Unicorn Press, 1959) 193.

[460] Arthur Symons, introduction, *The Poems of Ernest Dowson*, x. Dowson wrote to Sam Smith in June 1896 that "I am idolatrous for the rest of my days. Idolatrous to the extent that Keats was when he wrote from Rome to his friend Browne: 'the lining which she put in my travelling cap *scalds* my head; -- and like Keats I cannot open her letters for a day or so after they reach me", *Letters* 367. Richard Le Gallienne also made the connection in *The Romantic Nineties* (1926; London: Robin Clark Ltd., 1993) "He was a frail appealing figure, with an almost painfully sensitive face, delicate as a silverpoint, recalling at once Shelley and Keats", 110.

[461] Longaker 141.

[462] John Keats, *John Keats: Selected Letters and Poems*, ed. J. H. Walsh (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971) 45.

There are, however, certain similarities between Dowson's lyrics and those of Keats.[463] The most obvious of these occurs in the poem which begins "Cease smiling, Dear!":

> O could this moment be perpetuate!
> Must we grow old, and leaden-eyed and gray,
> And taste no more the wild and passionate
> Love sorrows of to-day?
>
> Grown old and faded, Sweet! and past desire,
> Let memory die, lest there be too much ruth,
> Remembering the old, extinguished fire
> Of our divine lost youth.

These lines appear to derive directly from Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale":

> Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
> Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
> Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
> And leaden-eyed despairs.[464]

Each poet focuses on the transience of youth and beauty with the same vocabulary of "leaden-eyes" and "gray" hair. Undoubtedly, Dowson's verbal parallels of "Ode to a Nightingale" reinforce the perceived links between the two poets.[465]

In the case of Dowson we need, as Michael Bradshaw observes of the minor Romantic poet George Darley, to break the habit of apology even though we may

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[463] It is also possible that Dowson derived "Wine and woman and song" from Keats's "Women, Wine and Snuff":

> Give me women, wine and snuff
> Until I cry out 'hold, enough!'
> You may do so sans objection
> Till the day of resurrection;
> For bless my beard they aye shall be
> My belovèd Trinity.

[464] John Keats, *John Keats: Selected Letters and Poems*, ed. J. H. Walsh (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971) 113.

[465] In *The Poetical Works of Ernest Dowson* (London: Cassell, 1934), 262, Desmond Flower fails to make this connection in his footnotes. Instead, he chooses to concentrate on the line "What sweets had life to me sweeter than this / Swift dying on thy breast?" suggesting that it derives from the Queen's speech in *Hamlet*, Act V, scene I, "Sweets to the sweet: Farewell!"

wish to uphold the idea of the "defeated" poet. Bradshaw identifies "certain important ingredients":

> promise, disadvantage, early or occasional praise by certain worthies, subsequent neglect, the integrity of the subject when compared to those less deserving but later more favoured with fame ... And a certain measure of self-reproach or self-destruction in the author is especially valuable.[466]

So while Dowson conforms, in a greater or lesser degree, to these criteria, there is still a need to see him as more than a pale reflection of Keats and to view his work as distinct from his life.

Yet the tendency to read the life in the work has also passed into American literature, as is exemplified in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night.* The opening scene puts Dowson into a particular continuum of nineteenth-century writers (albeit a chronologically disrupted one):

> *Against the wall in between the doorways is a small bookcase ...containing novels by Balzac, Zola, Stendhal ... poetry by Swinburne, Rossetti, Wilde, Ernest Dowson, Kipling, etc.*

Though Kipling was born before Dowson and died well after him (1865-1936), it appears that O'Neill considered that Dowson should be placed before Kipling because he belongs in the nineteenth century. However, Dowson is the only one of the list who is mentioned both by surname and Christian name, probably because O'Neill felt Dowson was not particularly well-known:

> EDMUND. To hell with sense! We're all crazy. What do we want with sense? (*He quotes from Dowson sardonically.*)
> "They are not long, the weeping and the laughter,
> Love and desire and hate:
> I think they have no portion in us after
> We pass the gate.

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[466] Michael Bradshaw, "Burying and Praising the Minor Romantic", conference paper, "Romantic Reputations", University of Bristol, October 1996, 2-3.

They are not long, the days of wine and roses:
Out of a misty dream
Our path emerges for a while, then closes
Within a dream."[467]

O'Neill reiterates the tendency to read the life in the work in every reference to Dowson, using him as an example of a dissipated life:

> EDMUND. (*as if he hadn't heard -- sardonically*). It's a good likeness of Jamie, don't you think, hunted by himself and whiskey, hiding in a Broadway hotel room with some fat tart -- he likes them fat -- reciting Dowson's Cynara to her. (*he recites derisively, but with deep feeling.*)
>
> "All night upon mine heart I felt her warm heart beat,
> Night-long within mine arms in love and sleep she lay;
> Surely the kisses of her bought red mouth were sweet;
> But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
> When I awoke and found the dawn was gray:
> I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."
>
> (*Jeeringly.*) ...And Jamie never loved any Cynara, and was never faithful to a woman in his life, even in his fashion.
> ... I've done the same damned thing. And it's no more crazy than Dowson himself, inspired by an absinthe hangover, writing it to a dumb barmaid, who thought he was a poor crazy souse, and gave him the gate to marry a waiter! *(He laughs -- then soberly, with genuine sympathy.)* Poor Dowson. Booze and consumption got him.[468]

The final reference to Dowson puts him along with "this Baudelaire, and Swinburne and Oscar Wilde, and Whitman and Poe!" *Long Day's Journey into Night* equates a disordered life with literature which is in some way subversive. Edmund's father suggests that he reads Shakespeare as an antidote to the perceived degeneracy -- physical and linguistic -- of the "whoremongers and degenerates". (When I've got three good sets of Shakespeare there ... you could read."[469]) Arguably, the sentiments expressed here recall those of Mackay at the end of the nineteenth century, who advocated a vocabulary of words that "have been sanctified by such

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467 Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941; London: Jonathan Cape, 1968) 113.
468 Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941; London: Jonathan Cape, 1968) 116.
469 Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941; London: Jonathan Cape, 1968) 117.

writers as Gower, Chaucer, and Spenser"[470] -- recourse to a literary heritage which is perceived as "pure".

Traditionally, discussions of Victorian literary decadence have paid disproportionate attention to the lives of the artists rather than to their works. It has been suggested that the poets of the nineties, with their disordered lives, produced texts of equal disorder. Such a view has arisen partly as a result of Max Beerbohm's designation of himself as belonging to "the Beardsley period". Specific events, such as the Wilde trials, the early (alcohol-related) deaths of Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson, and Hubert Crackanthorpe's suicide in the Seine have all contributed to the habit of reading the lives into the works. Pater's emphasis in "Style" on, among other things, personality, or soul, in literary style may have compounded the practice.

This is one of the reasons why the nineties has often been seen as a period complete in itself. It may, then, seem paradoxical to suggest that it was a "modern" era, but, as has been frequently observed, many of the late Victorian attitudes and structures were appropriated by the modernists who were usually unwilling to acknowledge their origins.

Though they had much in common, in *Blast* (1914), Pound and Wyndham Lewis explicitly rejected their late Victorian predecessors:

> BLAST
> years 1837 to 1900
>
> BLAST their weeping whiskers -- hirsute
> RHETORIC of EUNUCHS and STYLIST --
> diabolics -- raptures and roses
> of the erotic bookshelves
> culminating in
> PURGATORY OF PUTNEY[471]

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[470] "English Slang and French *Argot*," 690.

[471] Wyndham Lewis, ed. *Blast: Review of the Great English Vortex* (London: John Lane, 1914) 18.

Vorticism, the vaguely-defined movement which attacked the sentimentality of nineteenth-century art and celebrated the machine, emerged in *Blast* as a confused movement, the "blastings" and "blessings" appearing increasingly random. The "raptures and roses", ("The lilies and languors of virtue / For the raptures and roses of vice;" from Swinburne's *Dolores*, was among Dowson's favourite lines), refers to Swinburne who, in 1879, moved to Putney with Theodore Watts-Dunton. 1900, which saw the deaths of both Wilde and Dowson, was seen as the turning point:

> England emerged from Lupanars and Satanists about 1900, the Bourgeoisie having thoughtfully put Wilde in prison and Swinburne being returned definitely to Putney.[472]

The indiscriminate "blastings" and "blessings" in *Blast* were intended, ultimately, to praise the machine and condemn the sentimentality of nineteenth-century art. Accordingly, Smithers and Frank Harris are "blessed", while A. C. Benson and Swinburne are "blasted". Ironically, Jacob Epstein, highly praised in *Blast,* received the commission in 1909 for the tomb of one of the most vehemently "blasted" -- Wilde.

Eliot was less dismissive of his Victorian antecedents. Before turning to T. S. Eliot's tangible debt to Dowson it is worth noting that they had a critical predecessor in common: Pater. In "The Music of Poetry", 1942, Eliot asserts that:

> Every revolution in poetry is apt to be, and sometimes to announce itself to be a return to common speech. That is the revolution which Wordsworth announced in his prefaces ... but the same revolution had been carried out a century earlier by Oldham, Waller, Denham and Dryden; and the same revolution was due again something over a century later.[473]

The suggestion that the perceived "revolution" in poetry was something cyclical again sets Dowson and his contemporaries as part of a literary / historical process.

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[472] Wyndham Lewis, ed. *Blast: Review of the Great English Vortex* (London: John Lane, 1914) 188.

Dismissive of Walter Pater as a critic because of his "mind which is naturally of the creative order", Eliot's essay "The Music of Poetry" is still highly derivative of Pater:

> ... poetry must not stray too far from the everyday language which we use and hear. Whether poetry is accentual or syllabic, rhymed or rhymeless, formal or free, it cannot afford to lose its contact with the changing language of common intercourse.[474]

The revolution of which Eliot speaks is one of which he and Dowson are certainly a part. For Eliot, music in poetry is not Pater's specific of the inability to "detach the matter from the form",[475] but instead there "must be a music latent in the common speech of its time. And that means also that it must be latent in the common speech of the poet's place".[476] This is precisely the sentiment which Yeats was expressing within the Rhymers' Club; a return to the speaking voice, not only of the ordinary man, but in Yeats's case, the Celtic man:

> He must, like the sculptor, be faithful to the material in which he works; it is out of sounds that he has heard that he must make his melody and harmony. It would be a mistake however, to assume that all poetry ought to be melodious, or that melody is more than one of the components of the music of words. Some poetry is meant to be sung; most poetry, in modern times, is meant to be spoken.[477]

Eliot's reference to the sculptor and his material is undoubtedly derived from Pater's essay on "Style", although he makes no acknowledgment of the fact. Where Pater lays emphasis on vocabulary as the material with which the artist, as sculptor, works, Eliot sees sound to be the fundamental element:

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473 T. S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1975) 111.
474 T. S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1975) 110.
475 Walter Pater, "The School of Giorgione," *Essays on Literature and Art*, ed. Jennifer Uglow (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1973) 46.
476 T. S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1975) 112.

> My purpose here is to insist that a 'musical poem' is a poem which has a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words which compose it, and that these two patterns are indissoluble and one.[478]

Moreover, Eliot suggests along with Pater that "what matters in short, is the whole poem: and if the whole poem need not be, and often should not be, wholly melodious, it follows that a poem is not made only out of 'beautiful words' ... I believe that the properties in which music concerns the poet most nearly, are the sense of rhythm and the sense of structure".[479]

Pater and Eliot both insist on the importance of the whole poem, the structure, but the latter sees the importance of the communicative function of the poem, "it remains, all the same, one person talking to another; and this is just as true if you sing it, for singing is another way of talking. The immediacy of poetry to conversation is not a matter on which we can lay down exact laws."[480]

In Eliot's terms, the "new" poetry of the fin de siècle was part of a wider linguistic revolution in which he had greatest admiration for Dowson and Johnson. As I have observed, in modernist poetry there is a tendency to appropriate fragments from literary sources or other cultures without acknowledgement. A correspondent in *The Times Literary Supplement* of 1935 noted that:

> Dowson's loosening [of rhythm] was mainly carried out in the alexandrine ... He even began to loosen syntax, but not sufficiently to make him more than a first straw in the rising wind ... The loosening of rhythm connects Dowson with Mr Eliot, some of whose many roots may be found gripping Dowson's best poem, "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae." It seems less than fantastic to note, among more elusive communications, that the repeated

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[477] T. S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1975) 112.
[478] T. S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1975) 113.
[479] T. S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1975) 113.
[480] T. S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1975) 111.

> "Falls the shadow" of the "Hollow Men" seems to derive partly from this poem ... A favourite phrase of Dowson's is "the hollow land."[481]

In response, however, Eliot was quick to admit his debt to Dowson and other late Victorian figures:

> In the interesting review of Ernest Dowson's Poems in your last issue, your reviewer suggests that I caught the phrase "Falls the Shadow" from Dowson's "Cynara." This derivation had not occurred to my mind, but I believe it to be correct, because the lines he quotes had always run in my head, and because I regard Dowson as a poet whose technical innovations have been underestimated. But I do not think that I got the title "The Hollow Men" from Dowson. There is a romance of William Morris Called "the Hollow Land." There is also a poem of Mr Kipling called "The Broken Men." I combined the two.[482]

Given the very obvious correspondence between Dowson and Eliot in "The Hollow Men", it is interesting to consider other similarities between the Victorian and the modernist:

> *The Hollow Men*
> A Penny for the Old Guy
>
> We are the hollow men
> We are the stuffed men
> Leaning together
> Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
> Our dried voices, when
> We whisper together
> Are quiet and meaningless
> As wind in dry grass
> Or rats' feet over broken glass
> In our dry cellar
>
> Shape without form, shade without colour,
> Paralysed force, gesture without motion;
>
> ...

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481 "Ernest Dowson," *TLS* 3 Jan. 1935: 6.

482 T. S. Eliot, "Dowson's Poems," *TLS* 10 Jan. 1935: 21. It was not until much later that Eliot admitted a debt to Davidson and James Thomson, and even when he did, he was not specific. See Eliot's preface to *John Davidson: A Selection of his Poems*, ed. Maurice Lindsay (London: Hutchinson, 1961). It is also interesting to note that in *A Choice of Kipling's Verse*, ed. T. S. Eliot, (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1941) 12, Eliot approves strongly of the word "whimper" in "Danny Deever", designating it "exactly right".

III

This is the dead land
This is the cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.
. . .

V

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion and the response
Falls the Shadow

. . .

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.

Whether or not Eliot derived his "hollow lands" and "hollow men" from Dowson, Morris, or Kipling, his "hollow men" inhabit the "dead" and the "cactus" land. Eliot's figures, headpieces "stuffed with straw" are devoid of value -- analogous to Dowson's "perverse and aimless band" in "A Last Word":

Let us go hence: the night is now at hand;
The day is overworn, the birds all flown;
And we have reaped the crops the gods have sown;
Despair and death; deep darkness o'er the land,
Broods like an owl; we cannot understand
Laughter or tears, for we have only known
Surpassing vanity: vain things alone
Have driven our perverse and aimless band.
Let us go hence, somewhether strange and cold,
To Hollow Lands where just men and unjust

Find end of labour, where's rest for the old,
Freedom to all from love and fear and lust.
Twine torn our hands! O pray the earth enfold
Our life-sick hearts and turn them into dust.[483]

Dowson's "aimless band" has stripped the earth, "reaped the crops the gods have sown" and now moves on "To Hollow Lands where just men and unjust / Find end of labour". The emotions of Dowson's figures are superficial; they cannot understand sorrow or joy and "have only known / Surpassing vanity".

Similarly, Eliot's hollow men are "stuffed men" who speak only, if they speak at all, in whispers which "are meaningless". They occupy a "valley of dying stars", an implicitly dark world reminiscent of the night which is drawing in "A Last Word" or even of the end of creation. In both poems it is not only day which is "overworn", but the land which is a "hollow valley", a "broken jaw of our lost kingdoms".

But the "cactus lands" are also lands of stability. They are the "last of meeting places" as well as somewhere to "Find end of labour, where's rest for the old, / Freedom to all from love and fear and lust." Both Dowson and Eliot, however, end on an apocalyptic note. Dowson's "O pray the earth enfold / Our life-sick hearts and turn them into dust" calls to mind both apocalyptic anguish and a soothing image of the earth "enfolding" the body and releasing it from torment. The latter idea is made

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[483] The manuscript of "A Last Word" makes the "Hollow Lands" explicitly those of death. The original version is also a much more personal poem:

we cannot understand
The meaning of our life, all that is shown
Surpasseth bitterness: the die is
thrown
[Is bitter to the core, while over]
The veil of woe enwraps us where we stand.
Let us go hence, the grave is doubtless cold,
The coffin [strait / dank] -- yet there just and unjust
Find end of labour, there's rest for the old,
Freedom for all from fear and love and lust --
Let us go hence and pray the earth enfold
Our life-sick hearts and turn them into dust.

Flower offers "dank" as Dowson's manuscript version, but it is more probable that the word is "dark" since "dank" does not, in my opinion, correspond to Dowson's usual vocabulary.

more explicit in Eliot's version for "*This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper.*" As R. K. R. Thornton observes, "is this not a comment on the poets of the nineties, wistfully regretting their own inability to achieve their object, finding "death's twilight kingdom / The hope only / Of empty men."[484]

Dowson's shadow, to which Eliot admits his debt, is, of course, that of Cynara, "There fell thy shadow, Cynara!" Eliot confessed that "the lines ... had always run in my head", but his shadow is undoubtedly more abstract than Dowson's. It is certainly a shadow of doubt, and probably a shadow of death, which results in the inertia, the "Paralysed force".

It was not only Eliot who owed a debt to Dowson and to his contemporaries. "Dowson [also] made the concept of music in all good poetry significant to Pound".[485]

Yet Pound was more ambivalent about the poets of the nineties than Eliot. His attitude shifted alternately between approbation and condemnation. Though *Ripostes* (1912) reviled the poets of the nineties, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1919-20) exposes a more equivocal view of the fin de siècle poets.

Hugh Selwyn Mauberley traces the conditions which characterise the early nineteenth century and, in Pound's view, prevents artistic integrity. "Siena Mi Fe'; Disfecemi Maremma", a brief and formal section of the poem, concentrates exclusively on the artists of the nineties in Pound's general overview of the cultural milieu. Drawing on the reminiscences of "Monsieur Verog" -- Dowson's friend Victor Plarr -- Pound characterises the nineties as a time of degeneration and immorality. Yet Dowson and Johnson stand out in the catalogue which "Monsieur

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484 R. K. R. Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979) 95.

485 Sayed Hassan Shoukry, *The Victorian Taste: A Study of the Critical and Aesthetic Theories in the Victorian Period* (Riyad, Saudi Arabia: Riyad University Library Press, 1979) 202. Frank Kermode observes similarly that "Pound admired [Dowson], and his rhythms, and his Propertius, which he modernised", "Amateur of Grief," *New Statesman* 7 June 1963: 865.

Verog" presents as emblematic of their age ("Dowson found harlots cheaper than hotels") but also as worthy of remembrance:

> "SIENA MI FE'; DISFECEMI MAREMMA"
>
> [from Hugh Selwyn Mauberley]
>
> Among the pickled fœtuses and bottled bones,
> Engaged in perfecting the catalogue,
> I found the last scion of the
> Senatorial families of Strasbourg, Monsieur Verog.
>
> For two hours he talked of Galliffet;
> Of Dowson; of the Rhymers' Club;
> Told me how Johnson (Lionel) died
> By falling from a high stool in a pub ...
>
> But showed no trace of alcohol
> At the autopsy, privately performed --
> Tissue preserved -- the pure mind
> Arose toward Newman as the whiskey warmed.
>
> Dowson found harlots cheaper than hotels;
> Headlam for uplift; Image impartially imbued
> With raptures for Bacchus, Terpsichore and the Church.
> So spoke the author of "The Dorian Mood,"
>
> M. Verog, out of step with the decade,
> Detached from his contemporaries,
> Neglected by the young,
> Because of these reveries.

Pound had both edited *The Poetical Works of Lionel Johnson* (1915) and reviewed Plarr's book on Dowson (1915), applauding the latter for his ability to "objectify his friend while losing none of his sympathy", and designating it "charming".[486] Pound characterises the mood of the English decadent poets -- reliant, again, on personality -- by citing Newman's influence, the affinity for alcohol, and Dowson's "harlots".

Importantly, we can see how Pound finds Plarr "out of step with the decade", dwelling "Among pickled fœtuses and bottled bones". Where Dowson and Johnson

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[486] Ezra Pound, "Ernest Dowson, by Victor Plarr. Elkin Mathews," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 6 Apr. 1915: 44.

have achieved a degree of notoriety by the perception of their dissipated lives,[487] Plarr, as librarian at the Royal College of Surgeons, has sunk into literary mediocrity -- perhaps obscurity. Likewise, the Reverend Stewart Headlam and Selwyn Image[488] were figures of their age who, after the turn of the century, took different paths but are "preserved", like the fœtuses, as literary exemplars of the eighteen-nineties. By using the persona of Mauberley in this section of the poem, Pound is able both to mock and to express affection for his immediate predecessors. He, of course, did not "neglect" the poets of the fin de siècle, and he aligned himself, in part, with their urge for escapism.

Yet in 1934 Pound again expressed his contempt for late nineteenth-century poetry:

> The common verse of Britain from 1890 was a horrible agglomerate compost, not minted, most of it not even baked, all legato, a doughty mess of third-hand Keats, Wordsworth, heaven knows what, fourth-hand Elizabethan sonority blunted, half-melted, lumpy.[489]

Pound's own agglomeration of criticism is itself a "doughty mess" -- the verse cannot be "legato" and "lumpy" simultaneously -- though it highlights features of late Victorian poetry which Pound wished to reform, such as the tendency towards self-indulgence and "decayed lily verbiage".[490] In a letter to Iris Barry in 1916 Pound had already complained of the "soft mushy edges"[491] of symbolist poetry. Similarly, he demanded three years later:

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487 "The finest Art is not pure Abstraction, nor is it unorganised life", Wyndham Lewis, ed. *Blast: Review of the Great English Vortex* (London: John Lane, 1914) 184.

488 Selwyn Image (1849-1930), ordained in 1872, and Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford between 1910-16. The Reverend Stewart Duckworth Headlam was ordained in 1870 and held various posts including curate of St John's Evangelical church, Drury Lane, between 1870 and 1873.

489 Ezra Pound, quoted in *Ezra Pound: The Solitary Volcano*, ed. John Tytell, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd., 1987) 72.

490 Ezra Pound, quoted in *Ezra Pound: The Solitary Volcano*, ed. John Tytell, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd., 1987) 72.

491 Ezra Pound, "To Iris Barry," 27 July 1916, *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-41*, ed. D. D. Paige (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1951) 141.

> as for accuracy, what are we to say to the bilge of rendering 'puella' by the mid-Victorian pre-Raphaelite slush of romanticistic 'my lady'?[492]

Pound, a notoriously inaccurate translator himself, objects to precisely the rendering of the Latin given by Dowson in "Ad Manus Puellae", ("I was always a lover of ladies' hands"). Given Dowson's affection for young girls, it is curious that he should choose such an interpretation. It is only in the final couplet of "Ad Manus Puellae" that Dowson gives a reasonably accurate translation, "I am captive still of my pleasant bands / The hands of a girl, and most your hands."

However, I would argue that Dowson and his contemporaries are not guilty of those specifically "Victorian" poetic practices against which Pound revolted -- political eloquence and the irrelevant descriptions of nature that Pound called "decayed lily verbiage". There is no political eloquence to be found in Dowson, and his economy of style precludes him from accusations of "verbiage":

> Violets and leaves of vine,
> Into a frail, fair wreath
> We gather and entwine:

As I have argued elsewhere, Dowson's brevity in his poetry has the effect of a paring down and makes political eloquence both impossible and unsuitable in his verse.

It was not, however, just in the sphere of art that there were ambivalent feelings towards the eighteen-nineties. In social terms, the perception of an "unhealthy" movement persisted well beyond 1900. As Samuel Hynes hypothesises in A *War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*:

> War releases other aggressions too -- all those hostilities that have been present in peacetime, but restrained -- and so when war comes, other, 'little' wars come too: ... it is not surprising, then, that once the Great War had begun, conflicts of values began, and grew violent, or that qualities that cultivated Edwardians had taken to be the very signs of their nation's

[492] Ezra Pound, "To A. R. Orage," April 1919, *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-41*, ed. D. D. Paige (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1951) 212.

> civilisation were seen to be the symptoms of a national disease ... most Englishmen who confronted the question agreed that whatever the disease was, it was not English; some foreign pestilence had infected English life, English values, the English character over the past decades, and had deflected the nation from its proper course ... Futurism, Cubism, Decadence -- they were all one sickness.[493]

Decadence in England was equated, perhaps erroneously, with French decadence and the "yellow-backed" novels which so fascinated Dorian Gray.

Undoubtedly, coteries were forming which owed much to those of the eighteen-nineties. Diana Cooper recalled that:

> There was among us a reverberation of the Yellow Book and Aubrey Beardsley, Ernest Dowson, Baudelaire and Max Beerbohm. Swinburne often got recited. Our pride was to be unafraid of words, unshocked by drink and unashamed of "decadence."[494]

It was certainly true, then, that:

> Oscar Wilde had seemed dead in 1914, and pacifism had scarcely been born. But in 1918, both were alive and vocal.[495]

For a consideration of where Dowson fits into the historical continuum, we need to examine exactly what it was about decadence that certain factions felt would be removed and "purified" by war, and, indeed, what it was that allowed Wilde to be "alive and vocal" in 1918. Hynes suggests that the "decadence" argument became specifically rooted in "the sex problem". In 1918, there was still outrage at a planned production of Wilde's *Salomé*, which was seen as sexually deviant. Hynes cites Noel Pemberton Billing, MP for East Hertfordshire, who argued that:

> this exhibition as given by these people directly ministers to sexual perverts, Sodomites and Lesbians ... the practising of these vices, holding as they do,

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493 Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990) 57.

494 Diana Cooper, *The Rainbow Comes and Goes* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1958) 82.

495 Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990) 234.

> their devotees up to blackmail, has an international significance which is not calculated to prosper our cause in this war.[496]

Wilde was still the representative figure for homosexual practices, which were a crime against the army (and indeed still are):

> This conflation of decadent art with sexual and moral issues affected the situation of modern art in England generally. For it spread a blurry discredit over any new work that departed from the traditional English mainstream and made all Modernism seem not only *un*-English but anti-English.[497]

Therefore, poets of the eighteen-nineties were equated with homosexual practices as a result of their association with Wilde -- perceived or actual -- and were, accordingly, viewed as a threat to English national well-being. More specifically, Dowson's attachment to Adelaide and his fondness for young girls, as evinced most specifically in "Sonnets of a Little Girl", have implicated him in the fin de siècle "sex problem":

> As such an one with reverent awe I hold
> Thy tender hand, and in those pure grey eyes,
> That sweet child face, those tumbled curls of gold,
> And in thy smiles and loving, soft replies
> I find the whole of love -- hear full and low
> Its mystic ocean's tremulous ebb and flow.[498]

Such examples of Dowson's poetry have led many to suppose that his inclinations were paedophile and thus "decadent":

> Art could be Decadent -- that is foreign and unhealthy -- and if it were, it could infect the nation, and destroy its will to fight.[499]

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496 Noel Pemberton Billing, *Vigilante* 13 Apr. 1918: 3. Quoted in Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990) 227.
497 Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990) 230.
498 Ernest Dowson, *The Poetical Works of Ernest Dowson*, ed. Desmond Flower (London: Cassell and Co. Ltd., 1934) "Sonnets of a Little Girl" III 148.

Certainly, then, it was not only Wilde, but also the movement of which he seemed representative, which were alive and well even after the Great War:

> In 1918, Oscar Wilde was still alive in English imaginations; and his art was still identified with the crime for which he had been convicted, more than twenty years earlier.[500]

Philip Hoare, in *Wilde's Last Stand,* suggests that the prevailing social hope was that:

> the war would cut out the rotten core of culture, gone sour with the evil of Wilde. It would sweep away the Nineties decadents and the Edwardian hedonists.[501]

Indeed, the First World War succeeded in removing much of the younger generation, and in so doing it removed any aesthetic consensus. It is possible to argue that poetry split in two directions at the turn of the century: that there was a specifically "English" tradition, perpetuated, for example, by Hardy and Edward Thomas -- antithetical to decadence and modernism -- and that modernism was, in the main, a foreign import.

Pound's self-conscious coming to terms with the past and with dead poetic traditions in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* was actually a mythologising of the past. In criticising the tradition with which he was working, Pound reinforced the idea of an aesthetic void between 1890 and 1900. Monsieur Verog was part of the previous generation of radicals, but, according to Hoare, "Where the decadents of the 1890s had celebrated romantic death, their modern inheritors faced the reality."[502] But this is not the whole picture. As early as 1905, Edward Thomas observed of the nineties poets that:

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499 Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990) 229.
500 Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990) 229.
501 Philip Hoare, *Wilde's Last Stand: Decadence, Conspiracy and The First World War* (London: Duckworth, 1997) 14.

> they are dead, or their incomes are regular, or they are restoring their hair, and the man who read Dowson's poems when they first appeared ... will certainly be reminded that the years are full and dying. [503]

Thomas, then, pre-empts Pound's sentiments in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* but is more explicit in his praise of Dowson:

> The passion in his swaying, his tortured or his simple rhythms, and in his clear, pure, and simple diction is such that although hundreds have said the things he says, none but the great have said them in a way which can appeal so much to men of his own day.[504]

So while it is possible to identify two branches of English poetry after 1900, Dowson seems to have been equally valued by both:

> [Moralists] will talk of the connection between excess and a feeble frame, and liver, and delirium, and despair; and it is likely that they will end with a lament and a question as to what Dowson might have done had he been moderate.[505]

Dowson was undoubtedly considered, for some time, to be a part of the unhealthy pre-war scenario, to be swept away between 1914 and 1918. It is difficult to imagine the path Dowson would have taken had he outlived the century, and his death in 1900, like Wilde's, has amplified his status as a product of the nineteenth century. It is interesting to observe Jepson's attempts to continue writing into the twentieth

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[502] Philip Hoare, *Wilde's Last Stand: Decadence, Conspiracy and The First World War* (London: Duckworth, 1997) 9.

[503] Edward Thomas, "Ernest Dowson," *A Language Not To be Betrayed: Selected Prose of Edward Thomas*, ed. Edna Longley (Manchester: Carcanet, 1981) 60. Thomas's remark is probably aimed at John Davidson, who was well-known for his wig!

[504] Edward Thomas, "Ernest Dowson," *A Language Not To be Betrayed: Selected Prose of Edward Thomas*, ed. Edna Longley (Manchester: Carcanet, 1981) 60.

[505] Edward Thomas, "Ernest Dowson," *A Language Not To be Betrayed: Selected Prose of Edward Thomas*, ed. Edna Longley (Manchester: Carcanet, 1981) 60. In *Time and Again: Memoirs and Letters*, ed. Myfanwy Thomas (Manchester: Carcanet, 1978), 41, Helen Thomas recalls of the Wintersdorf School, Southport, that:

> William Watson came and gave us a recital of music -- he was a wonderful pianist -- and Richard le Gallienne, a protégé of Father's, came to speak on the subject of 'Beauty', and once Oscar Wilde visited the school to lecture us on 'The Home Beautiful'.

century.[506] In May 1917 Pound rejected Jepson's submission for *Blast: Review of the Great English Vortex* on the grounds that:

> it don't in the least express the quality of bitterness that I want, the peculiar kind of contempt for contemporary mentality, for the reading public ... I can use nothing which is not definitely an insult to the public-library, the general-reader, the weekly press.[507]

Indeed, a review of Dowson's poems from 1905 remarks upon the alacrity with which "the smart journalists caught readily for 'copy' at what was obvious and lamentable in this sad life",[508] in an attempt to commodify both the poet and his work.

Armstrong has highlighted the formation of conditions central to twentieth-century poetry, which include "the growing aestheticisation of poetry concurrent with an increasing exploitation of it as a commodity" and "the final breakdown of the idea of a coherent bourgeois audience for literature".[509] In his letters, Dowson frequently passes judgement on the "Philistia! O British Public!"[510] and though the editors of *Blast* wanted to deny literary production between eighteen-ninety and nineteen-ten, Dowson expresses, in his correspondence at least, "the peculiar kind of contempt for contemporary mentality, for the reading public" that Pound demanded.

Laura Riding and Robert Graves, in 1927, gave this interpretation of the matter:

> In the nineteenth century, because of a reading public enlarged by democracy, clearness meant not so much obeying rules as writing for the largest possible audience. The twentieth century reaction in poetry against nineteenth century standards is not against clearness and simplicity but against rules for poetry made by the reading public, instead of by the poets themselves as they were

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[506] The British Library holds over of ninety of Jepson's books, including translations such as *Dorothy the Rope-Dancer*, by Maurice Marie Émile Leblanc (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1923), and *Pollyooly* (London: Mills and Boon, 1911).

[507] Ezra Pound, "To Edgar Jepson," 29 May 1917, *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-41*, ed. D. D. Paige (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1951) 167.

[508] "Miserrimus," *Saturday Review* 17 June 1905: 808.

[509] Armstrong 479. *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* examines both these phenomena. "Mr Nixon," considers the commodification of literature, particularly of verse, ("The 'Nineties tried your game / And died, there's nothing in it.") ("Consider / "Carefully the reviewer.").

[510] *Letters* 200.

> in the eighteenth century ... The quarrel now is between the reading public and the modernist poet over the definition of clearness. Both agree that perfect clearness is the end of poetry, but the reading public insists that no poetry is clear except what it can understand at a glance; the modernist insists that the clearness of which the poetic mind is capable demands thought and language of a far greater sensitiveness and clarity than the enlarged reading public will permit it to use. To remain true to his conception of what poetry is, he has therefore to run the risk of seeming obscure or freakish, of having no reading public; even of writing what the reading public refuses to call poetry, in order to be a poet.[511]

Arguably, Riding and Graves justify inferior poetry by suggesting that the poet might appear "obscure or freakish" or produce something which is not recognised, in the main, as poetry and yet still be a poet.

The reading public had indeed set the rules for high Victorian poets, but not for poets of the nineties. Of course, by the eighteen-nineties, the role of the poet as prophet had diminished and there was little need to write "for the largest possible audience". Decadent poets of the nineties such as Dowson and Symons were equally open to Riding and Graves's charge of "seeming obscure and freakish" in their poetry. The lack of a reading public which is here attributed to modernist poets is also true of nineties poets.

Undoubtedly, however, poetry of the eighteen-nineties has been read continually, if by a restricted audience. Derek Mahon's collection *Night-Crossing* (1968)[512] includes the following eulogy to "Dowson and Company":

> Slowly, with the important carelessness
> Of your kind, each spirit-sculpted face
> Appears before me -- eyes
> Bleak from discoveries.
>
> I had almost forgotten you had been,
> So jealous was I of my skin
> And the world with me. How
> Goes it with you now?

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511 Robert Graves and Laura Riding, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1927) 83-4.
512 Derek Mahon, *Night-Crossing* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) 4.

Did death and its transitions disappoint you,
And the worms you so looked forward to?
Perhaps you found that you had to *queue*
For a ticket into hell,
Despite your sprays of laurel.

You were all children in your helpless wisdom,
Retiring loud-mouths who would not be dumb --
Frustrated rural clergymen
Nobody would ordain.

Then ask no favour of reincarnation,
No yearning after the booze and whores --
For you, if anyone,
Have played your part
In holding nature up to art ...

Be content to sprawl in your upland meadows,
Hair and boy-mouths stuck with flowers --
And rest assured, the day
Will be all sunlight, and the night
A dutiful spectrum of stars.

Mahon's comment that "I had almost forgotten you had been" conjures the vague, yet permeating, influence of the poets of the nineties upon their successors. "Transitions" is a favourite word of Dowson's, and the third stanza evokes the atmosphere of Dowson and his contemporaries, who, with their "sprays of laurel",[513] number so many that they have to "*queue* / For a ticket into hell". The "transition" desired by the poets of the nineties was hell (or the underworld) more often than it was heaven. Again, Dowson is represented as an alcoholic "whoremonger", while Mahon exhorts him not to tread the same path if reincarnated. The final image of Dowson, with perhaps Symons, John Gray -- who was, of course, ordained -- and Le Gallienne, "sprawl[ed] in upland meadows", calls to mind not only the often-reproduced picture of Le Gallienne[514]at Haslemere in 1897 languishing in the

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513 Upon hearing of Dowson's death, Wilde wrote to Smithers, "I hope bay-leaves will be laid on his tomb, and rue, and myrtle too, for he knew what love is", *The Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) 353.

514 This picture is reproduced on the cover of the 1993 edition of Le Gallienne's *The Romantic Nineties* (1926; London: Robin Clark Ltd., 1993).

heather, but also a conversation which occurs in Dowson and Moore's novel *Adrian Rome*:

> "To-day, I have been picking cowslips on the Cumnor hills" [said Brooke].
> Adrian smiled.
> "Cowslips -- in August? My dear Brooke!" he protested.
> The other waved his hand with a gesture of benignant tolerance.
> "Don't they flourish now? How wonderful of you to know, Adrian. I know nothing about them, except that they rhyme wonderfully with 'lips.'"[515]

The point, then, is that nineties poets constructed their "upland meadows" out of their poetic symbols, their lilies and violets, regardless of their "natural" properties. The "upland meadows" of which Mahon writes exist only within the poetic sphere, within the imagination.

It is worth noting that Mahon designates the fin de siècle artists "children", suggesting immaturity and pointing up their bridging role for later poets. Moreover, at the fin de siècle there was certainly a sense of "belatedness" -- as expressed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* not just as "fin de siècle" but as "fin du globe".[516]

As we approach the millennium, the literature of the Victorian fin de siècle is enjoying a revival.[517] Specifically, Michael Moorcock's trilogy *The Dancers at the End of Time* and his collection *Legends from the End of Time* are a modern tribute to the techniques of the English decadents:

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515 Ernest Dowson and Arthur Moore, *Adrian Rome* (London: Methuen and Co., 1899) 181.

516 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Isobel Murray (1891; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 179.

517 Anthony Thwaite's "On Consulting 'Contemporary Poets of the English Language'" in *A Portion For Foxes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977) 30-2. He includes himself along with poets of the nineties:

> What is it, you may ask, that Thwaite's
> Up to in this epic? Yeats'
> Remark in the Cheshire Cheese one night
> With poets so thick they blocked the light:
> 'No-one can tell who has talent, if any.
> One thing's certain. We are too many.

Clearly Yeats was drawing on the death of Little Father Time and the children in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. It is interesting that Thwaite includes himself in a specifically "English" tradition which includes those who frequented the Cheshire Cheese.

> I took huge pleasure in writing these stories. They are my light-hearted homage to George Meredith, in particular, but also to Dowson, Beardsley, Simons [*sic*], Swinburne and the Irish wits, to all those contributors to *The Savoy* and *The Yellow Book* who impressed me with their glorious insouciance and cleverness when I was a boy and wanting to have done nothing more than spend an evening at the Café Royal in their company.[518]

The Dancers at the End of Time, the trilogy comprising "An Alien Heat" (1972), "The Hollow Lands" (1974), and "The End of All Songs" (1976), takes the titles of its second and third volumes directly from Dowson's poetry. "The Hollow Lands" reprints "A Last Word"[519] on the title page, and "The End of All Songs" quotes Dowson's "Dregs" from *Decorations*, deriving its title from the line "(This is the end of every song man sings!)". Set, as the name suggests, at the end of time, Moorcock mixes twentieth-century fantasy with the literary (and historical) precedent set by the artists of the nineties.

The world at the end of time is a world of artifice, presented by Moorcock as a world of textual artifice, much like that of Beardsley's *Venus and Tannhäuser*, in which he writes of "sumptuous bruises".[520] Similarly, the world in Moorcock's conception of the end of time is one of "soda-purple poppies and tea-green roses", in which "a month swooned by".[521] Moorcock observes that "an earlier age would have seen the inhabitants of this world as 'decadent' or 'amoral'".[522] This is demonstrated in the sections which are set in late Victorian London and are peopled with representative figures. When Amelia Underwood, the nineteenth-century time-

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518 Michael Moorcock, foreword, *Legends from the End of Time* (London: Millennium - Orion Books, 1993). N. pag.

519 "A Last Word," which is printed at the end of *Decorations* (1899), appears in two stanzas in Symons's edition of *The Poems of Ernest Dowson* (1905) but as a single stanza in Flower's *The Poetical Works of Ernest Dowson* (1934). It was originally the eighth and last sonnet of the "Sonnets to a Little Girl", entitled "Epilogue". In this version it also appears as a single stanza.

520 Aubrey Beardsley, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser or "Under The Hill"*, (1907; London: St Martin's Press Inc. - Academy Editions, 1974) 26.

521 Michael Moorcock, *The Dancers at the End of Time* (London: Panther Books - Granada Publishing Ltd., 1983) 22.

522 Michael Moorcock, *The Dancers at the End of Time* (London: Panther Books - Granada Publishing Ltd., 1983) vii.

traveller arrives, inadvertently, at the end of time, she rejects all that is offered to her because she perceives it to be "decadent":

> 'And what is this?'
> 'Clothes,' he said, 'for you to wear. Aren't they pretty?'
> She looked down at the profusion of colours, the variety of materials. They scintillated. Their beauty was undeniable and the colours suited her ... then she spurned the clothes with her buttoned boot.
> 'These are not suitable clothes for a well-bred lady,' she said.
> 'You may take them away.'[523]

Similarly, she expresses indignation when Jherek asks whether she is familiar with Swinburne's poetry, "Swinburne? Certainly not, sir!" and she comments on Swinburne's "excesses".[524]

Moorcock's version of "decadence", as practised by the inhabitants at the end of time, has few connotations of decay such as were being voiced at the Victorian fin de siècle. Though there are decayed cities of the past, there is always a re-birth out of decline, and when the end of time is reached, Moorcock takes two characters and places them at the beginning of time. The beginning of time is sparse and barren, and Jherek and Amelia are warned that:

> You will have to build your own shelters, grow and hunt your own food. There are no material advantages at all, [525]

while the end of time is a world of vivid imaginations which are capable of creating an extravagant environment:

> the Duke's residence itself changed frequently and the Duke of Queens often managed to astonish everyone with the originality and scope of his invention.[526]

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523 Michael Moorcock, *The Dancers at the End of Time* (London: Panther Books - Granada Publishing Ltd., 1983) 82.
524 Michael Moorcock, *The Dancers at the End of Time* (London: Panther Books - Granada Publishing Ltd., 1983) 651.
525 Michael Moorcock, *The Dancers at the End of Time* (London: Panther Books - Granada Publishing Ltd., 1983) 654.

There are one or two voices of dissent throughout the novels, but, in general, Moorcock's fantasy-world is one of positives.

Moorcock's homage to the figures of the nineties is most tangible when Jherek Carnelian, the central figure of *The Dancers at the End of Time*, returns to eighteen-nineties London:

> 'The man,' said Jherek, 'who was sitting across the table from you. Do you know him, Mr Harris?'
> 'He's a contributor to the *Review* from time to time, like everyone else here. Name of Jackson. Does little pieces on the arts for us.'
> 'Jackson?'
> 'Do you know his stuff? If you want to meet him, I'll be glad to introduce you. But I thought your interest in coming to the Café Royale tonight was in talking to H. G. Wells here.'[527]

In a rather complicated tale, Jherek is mistaken for a French critic, but this is a device which allows Moorcock to introduce cameo appearances by Frank Harris, H. G. Wells, and Jackson (an incarnation of another character), who can be assumed to be Holbrook Jackson, author of *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913).

While "Pale Roses", collected in *Legends from the End of Time* (1993), is dedicated to Meredith "who taught me, at least, a technique", it derives its title from Dowson's poem, "Transition":

> Short summer-time and then, my heart's desire,
> The winter and the darkness: one by one
> The roses fall, the pale roses expire
> Beneath the slow decadence of the sun.

We know, then, that what we consider to be "the nineties" as a literary and artistic period began some time in the eighteen-eighties and persisted well into the nineteen-twenties. There has been continued debate, reaching its peak around nineteen-sixty, as to whether the nineties is a period "complete in itself", as Holbrook Jackson sees it

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[526] Michael Moorcock, *The Dancers at the End of Time* (London: Panther Books - Granada Publishing Ltd., 1983) 13.

in *The Eighteen-Nineties*, or as a "transitional" decade as Le Gallienne asserts in *The Romantic Nineties*.[528] Clearly, to focus exclusively on the movement which we term literary "decadence" is to paint only a partial picture of the literary scene at the turn of the century, when Hardy was no less vocal than Wilde and when there was much railing against literary realism.

As I have indicated, Dowson was valued equally by key modernists and by poets whom we might class as essentially Georgian, and, in that sense, I would wish to argue that he was a "transitional" poet.

Is it, then, still relevant to ask, as an anonymous reviewer did in 1919:

> How is it ... when the world is ruled by different and hostile literary fashions, Dowson's poetry is still sufficiently alive to make it worth a publisher's while to reprint it?[529]

His answer, that:

> by piping continually in the same melancholy mode [Dowson] arrived in the end at a small perfection of his own; and perfection, even in a little, limited thing, will always ensure for the poet who achieves it more than a temporary hearing,

does not adequately explain the continued appeal of Dowson's poetry, especially in the United States.

In June 1897 Wilde, who clearly valued him highly as a poet, wrote to Dowson:

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[527] Michael Moorcock, *The Dancers at the End of Time* (London: Panther Books - Granada Publishing Ltd., 1983) 252.

[528] Yeats himself asked in *Autobiographies*, "Was it that we lived in what is called an 'age of transition' and so lacked coherence, or did we but pursue antithesis?" 304. For an excellent overview of the debate, see Ian Fletcher, "The 1890s: A Lost Decade," *Victorian Studies* 4 (1961): 345-54. See also Helmut E. Gerber, "The Nineties: Beginning, End, or Transition?" *Edwardians and Late Victorians*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960) 50-79. Gerber himself identifies a "distinct period between about 1800 and about 1920, or, more flexibly, between 1870 and 1930. I do not regard the nineties as significantly a genesis of anything, and the decade seems to me not to be significantly the end of anything. For me this decade is not an independent, more or less self-sufficient period ... [it] can best be denoted with the words "interim," "experimentation," "turning point" or "transition." 55.

[529] "A Ghost of the Nineties," *Athenaeum* 10 Oct. 1919: 966.

> Cher Monsieur le Poète, It was most kind of you coming to see me, and I thank you very sincerely and gratefully for your pleasant companionship and the many gentle ways by which you recalled to me that, once at any rate, I was a Lord of Language, and had myself the soul of a poet.[530]

I hope I have shown that Dowson, in his own way, was as much a "Lord of Language" as Wilde. Dowson -- whose originality lies not in his subject-matter but in his handling of it -- provided a bridge for twentieth-century poets. Dowson appears to have been aware of this when he wrote "But one is not with impunity of this damned, fastidious, fascinating century." [*sic*][531] The bridge which Dowson provided through his handling of his subjects was more valuable than the rhetorical "stilts" to which Yeats referred when he wrote that:

> in 1900 everybody got down off his stilts; henceforth nobody drank black coffee; nobody went mad; nobody committed suicide; nobody joined the Catholic church; or if they did I have forgotten.[532]

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[530] Oscar Wilde, "To Ernest Dowson," 5 June 1897, *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) 291.
[531] *Letters* 59.
[532] W. B. Yeats, "Introduction to the Oxford Book of Modern Verse," *Yeats: Selected Criticism and Prose*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1980) 217.

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From a drawing by W. Rothenstein.